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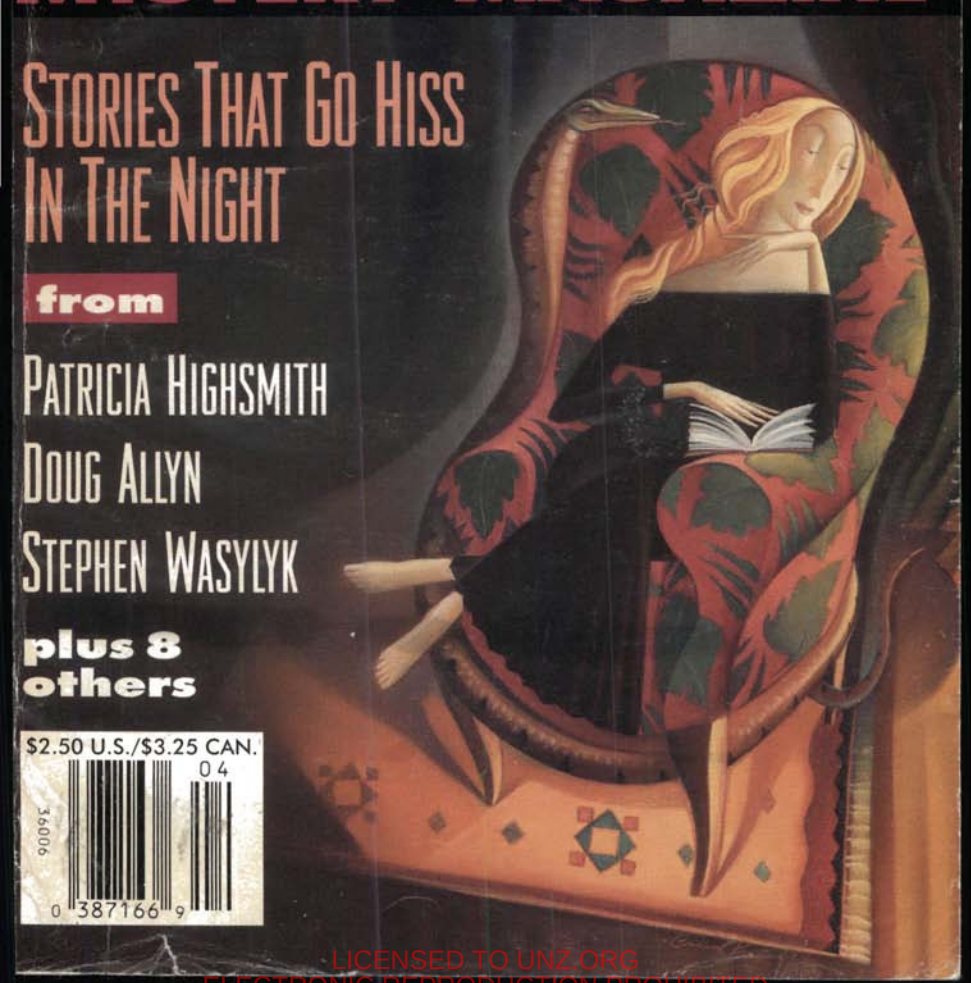

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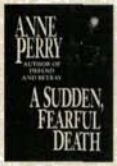

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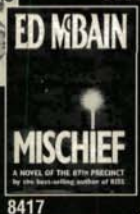

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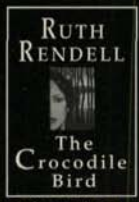

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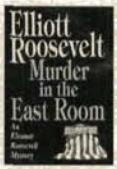

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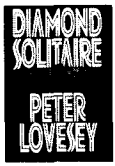

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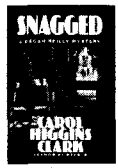

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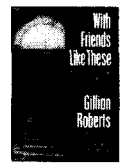

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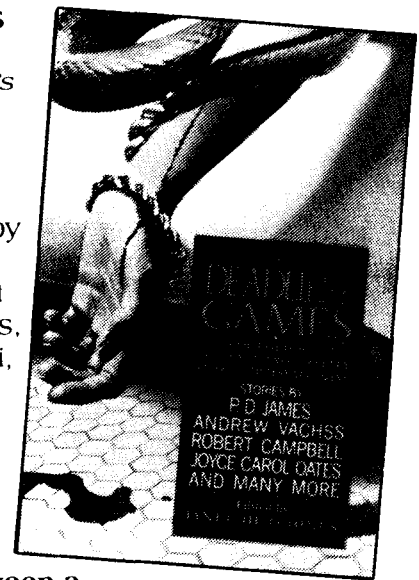

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PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

Patricia Highsmith grew up in New York City, but since 1963 she has lived in Europe where she has for many years been recognized as a topnotch suspense writer, a recipient of the Grand Prix de Literature Policiere and the Crime Writers Association Silver Dagger. Despite her many years abroad, the author has kept a finger on the pulse of the city in which she was raised, creating for us a very contemporary New York story . . .

SUMMER DOLDRUMS

by PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

After a while, Johnny couldn't remember which of them had thought it up, he or Grant, and it didn't matter. They were buddies, went to the same high school, and by accident lived in the same apartment house on Central Park West. And it was summer, hot as hell toward the end of June, Manhattan sweltering in a steam bath, sweating through shirts and summer jackets after half an hour out of air conditioning, grateful for the least breeze that came from the Hudson direction or the East River. And Johnny and Grant were bored, Johnny bored with the prospect of waiting another ten days till he could go up to Lake Champlain with his mother and stepfather for a two-week holiday. Grant was going to Maine with his folks.

They were bored with putting on running shorts and Adidas (and not running), and looking for a shady bench in Central Park to sit down with ice-cream cones and watch the girls go by, vying with each other to say the more shocking and vulgar thing they would do with a certain girl in view, if they had her alone, and tired of saying of the fattest or the ugliest girl, "That's for *you!*"

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So they thought of "the hotel murders." It sounded so easy from the start, so simple, very nearly foolproof. Each would do one, do meaning murder, murder a total stranger.

"A guy not too big, of course," Grant had said in his practical way, laughing.

On the park bench, they had unconsciously lowered their voices, as if someone might be hiding in the dense bushes behind them, listening.

"A hammer? I think a hammer," said Johnny. "Easy to carry in your waistband, y'know? We'll have to wear summer jackets. No problem." No problem was lately a favorite phrase, even when there might be a problem.

"Maybe not so easy," said Grant thoughtfully, "hanging around the desk till we know the guy's alone—"

"Oh, if someone else is in the room, you say, 'Is this Mr. Bloomingdale?' or something, and he says no, and you say it's a mistake."

The idea was to find out a room number, overhear the key number the hotel guest asked for at the desk, then after a few minutes take an elevator to that floor, knock, and say, "Message we failed to give you downstairs, sir."

When the door opened, barge in and close the door and out with the hammer. After knocking the man out, step on the front of his throat until he was dead, then wipe the hammer well with a handkerchief brought for that purpose and leave the hammer and depart, after checking that the hall was clear. Elevator down. And out. Nothing stolen. All smooth and casual. Lots of people walked in and out of hotels unnoticed.

They leaned back on the bench and had a laugh, a rather quiet laugh. Grant pulled off his top, an underwear top, cooler than a T-shirt, mopped his forehead and neck with it, and put it back on. Both agreed it would make a hell of a story to tell, a lot better than having shoplifted a few CDs!

"And you know," Johnny went on, "it's a good time to do it, when we're both about to leave town anyway. Maybe we should wait till—just two or three days before, like, before we leave, I mean."

"You got something, y'right. All we have to do is pick the hotel—two hotels, natch."

"Natch," Johnny echoed. "I'm thinking of the Murray Hill area, medium-sized hotels, not *so* big where they might have staff asking if they can help you."

"Got a hammer at home?"

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"Sure. You?"
"Yeah."
"Okay, who's first?"
"Doesn't matter, does it?" asked Grant.

Johnny was to go first. Grant had nudged him into it, he realized, into going first, but they both were going to do it, no doubt about that. It was like diving into the school swimming pool from the high diving board, which Johnny hated: if the first guy or guys did it, you couldn't hang back and say you were scared or you hated it. You'd never be able to hold your head up again, the fellows wouldn't let you forget. So Johnny said, "Okay, sure, but maybe not tomorrow just like *that!* I've got a few days to play around with."

They had rehearsed it, alone and together, a couple of times. "Message we failed to give you downstairs, sir."

Johnny's name was really Kim Alexander Kent. He hated the Kim, because for one thing he'd heard of a couple of girls called Kim. Johnny disliked the new fancy names like Ryan (a last name anyway), and place names like Chelsea, for boys or girls. He hadn't noticed anyone being called Harlem yet. But there was the goddam Kim on his *passport*. What was the matter with William or Charles? So he had named himself John, insisted on it as best he could, and he had won, he felt. Johnny had light brown hair and was not so heavy as Grant Snyder. He lived with his mother and George Sipio, her second husband, who was an electronics repairman and worked at a shop on West End Avenue. No brothers or sisters.

The hotel Johnny picked was on Thirty-ninth over close to Second Avenue. It was called the Eastside Towers, though there were no towers to be seen. Johnny wore dark blue cotton slacks and his best sneakers, a pale blue shirt with a tie, a seersucker jacket of white and pale blue stripe pattern. The hammer head stuck up above his belt on the right side, while the wooden handle was inside his trousers. He had ridden two buses, standing up, to get here, and he kept his jacket buttoned.

"If the Eastside Towers doesn't work out," he told himself for the fourth time, "New York is full of hotels and there's tomorrow and the next day."

Johnny Kent entered the lobby—two steps down from the double-doored entrance—with an air of expecting someone who in a few minutes would come in via the main doors he had used. A woman

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approached the desk and asked if there were any messages for Hopkins.

"That's two twelve."

"No, madam." Then came the click of her key on the marble.

Johnny remembered Grant saying, "Easier, sure, but I couldn't kill a woman. No way!" Johnny had agreed one hundred percent.

A man entered, big fellow, with a brown paper bag that looked like a booze bag. "Anything for six-oh-one?"

The desk clerk looked, and brought back a small folded piece of paper.

He's too big, Johnny thought, and despite the air conditioning, sweat broke out all over him. He longed to loosen his tie, unbutton his jacket.

Here came a couple. Behind them, a single man. The couple looked at postcards on a rack by the desk. The single man said:

"Thornton. Four eighty-two, please."

The clerk behind the desk laid the key before Mr. Thornton.

Johnny folded his arms and looked at the wide doorway, at the same time drifted farther into the hotel, nearer the elevators. Mr. Thornton had already gone up.

Now a crowd of five people came in, some with luggage, all aiming for the front desk. There seemed no other employee of the hotel in sight at the moment, save the neat, slender clerk.

Johnny pressed the up button. An elevator arrived, two figures got off, and Johnny got on. He pressed four. A man entered before the elevator door closed. He pressed a number higher than four. Johnny got out at four. He had not even glanced at the other man.

Johnny rang the bell at four eighty-two. After several seconds, a rather elderly voice said:

"Yes, who is it?"

"Message we failed to give you downstairs, sir."

A bolt turned, the door opened a little, and Johnny pushed it wider and stepped in, quickly closed the door again, and whipped out the hammer.

"What the—"

Crack!

Johnny had hit the side of his head, and as the man faltered, sagged, Johnny came down on the crown of his head with considerable force. Down he went. Johnny shifted, but only briefly, before he placed his right foot on the front of the man's throat. He stood on that foot, lost his balance, and did it again, trying to jump to

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increase the pressure. Surely now, surely, Johnny thought, but he didn't want to linger long enough to see if the man was dead. The old guy was at least fifty, Johnny thought, his eyes had shut now, and just the least bit of blood came from the top of his head. Handkerchief out, wipe the hammer, it was done.

Done! Johnny took deep breaths, laid the hammer on the carpet. The man's left foot was twisted to one side in a way that surely looked dead, Johnny thought. Johnny was listening. He dreaded opening the door. He forced himself, handkerchief in hand, gripping the knob.

Someone stood waiting for an elevator. Johnny closed the door, waited for what he thought was a whole minute, and tried again. The figure was gone. Johnny went out, closed the door and wiped the knob, pushed the wadded handkerchief into his jacket pocket. He rang for an elevator. Now he could unbutton his jacket, loosen his tie. A man and woman joined him before the elevator arrived. Johnny did not look at them.

In the lobby, he walked in no hurry toward the main doors, looking at no one. At the next corner (he had walked west), he took off his jacket and put it over his arm. He felt drenched in sweat, felt that his pale blue shirt had turned dark blue. But wasn't all of New York drenched in sweat?

Half an hour later, Johnny stood under his own shower, letting cool water wet even his hair. His mother and stepfather were out, as they both worked.

Before five P.M., the telephone rang. Grant.

"Yes," Johnny said firmly.

That was their unarranged code word. Grant understood.

"Really," said Grant. "You mean it."

"You'll see." Johnny meant, there'd be something in the newspapers, even if small. "And you? When you going to get busy?"

"I think tomorrow," Grant said in a casual drawl.

"Bye for now." Johnny hung up. They had agreed, they shouldn't see each other the same day of a murder, maybe not at all before they left town for separate destinations.

The next day was Tuesday. He wouldn't make TV news, Johnny supposed, and he didn't buy a newspaper. For one thing, he didn't want to read that the guy was still alive and recalled the way his attacker looked. Johnny casually watched TV crime plays, old movies, and told himself he was bored, as usual. His mother and stepfather apparently noticed no change in him. Good. Johnny longed to

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call up Grant Wednesday afternoon before six, when Grant's folks came home, but he didn't dare. Johnny's mother sent him out to buy ice cream at the deli around seven P.M., and Johnny hoped to run into Grant in the big lobby downstairs, but he didn't.

Along with the ice cream, Johnny bought a late edition of the *Post*. He was alone in his room just before nine P.M. when he found it on page five. There was a photo of William Thornton, 56, "battered to death by unknown attacker in Murray Hill area hotel." "Assailant Left Hammer" was the caption above the photo. Of course he wasn't going to cut the item out and keep it. But if Grant wanted proof—!

Saturday morning Grant telephoned around half-past nine, as he often did when trying to set up a date with Johnny. Johnny's mother answered and passed the phone at once to Johnny. She was collecting her shopping bags, about to go out with George, and neither of them was paying any attention to Johnny.

"Well—it's yes for me," Grant said on a note of pride.

"So?—Congrats."

"House fulla people there?"

"They're leaving f'shopping. You mean—yes."

"I mean *yes*," Grant said boldly. "You'll see. This evening or tomorrow."

Johnny, tongue-tied, wanted very much to see Grant today, longed just to sit on a park bench with him, and knew that he probably shouldn't. "See you tomorrow, maybe?"

"Ye-eah," thoughtfully, "maybe."

"Meet you on the park bench? You know. The usual?—Ten-thirty, maybe?"

It was a deal. Johnny felt immensely relieved, almost happy. Funny. The date Sunday helped him get through the rest of Saturday, which he felt was merely boring, horribly boring, packing his athletic socks, clean jeans, putting a cover on his tennis racquet—boring! His family weren't even leaving till Tuesday.

Johnny was twenty minutes early on the green bench, dressed in running shorts, worn-out sneaks, T-shirt, no socks. Sweat already ran down the groove in the center of his torso, and he hadn't even exerted himself, walking lazily across Central Park West. No hint of a breeze.

Here came Grant in nearly the same garb, smiling a little. "Ol' pal," said Grant, plopping himself down. He looked at Johnny again. "You act as if you don't—don't believe me. Smile."

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Johnny smiled, and not because of Grant's command. "Okay."

"You'll see."

Grant meant the newspapers, Johnny knew.

"They're slow," Grant said. "Maybe looking all around for clues first."

"Lotsa luck!" Now Johnny laughed.

Grant had brought an old tennis ball, dirty and probably with not much bounce left. He kept squeezing it hard and releasing it in his right hand, as if he'd brought the ball for this purpose only.

Johnny wanted to ask, "Did you leave the hammer, too?" but he didn't want to utter the word hammer out here in the open. After all, people were walking on the path in front of them, walking slowly in both directions. It had occurred to Johnny that he and Grant could blackmail each other now or years from now, but in fact they couldn't, as he saw it. What proof would either have, if there were no fingerprints, no names, no descriptions? It would be merely a secret between them, important yet probably not believable to other people.

"Look for a frank soon?" asked Grant. "Hell with the heat, I'm getting hungry."

Johnny had heard the same words before, a lot of times. There'd be pushcarts selling frankfurters and Coca-Cola and root beer along Central Park West, and they'd stroll along till they came to one. Like many times before. They got up and ambled along a curving path toward the Central Park West pavement. Grant lazily bounced the tennis ball which hadn't much bounce.

That afternoon, Johnny looked through the *Sunday Mirror* which his stepfather had brought in. There it was, Grant's work. Not on the front page, but with a photo larger than Johnny's for William Thornton. A man in trousers and shirtsleeves lay on a hotel room floor, in a relaxed position on his side, as if asleep. "Hammer Killer Strikes Again," said the caption. "Kenneth Jurgen, 42, of Evanston, Illinois, was bludgeoned to death in a West Side hotel room by an unidentified assailant."

Johnny felt no shock at all, on the contrary felt a sense of comfort and safety.

Johnny and Grant did not try to see each other again Sunday, an awful day at best, when everybody, though claiming to be "busy," somehow had time for snooping and spying. Johnny watched TV. Grant did phone Monday. His folks also weren't leaving till Tuesday,

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so why didn't they meet as usual? Grant's voice sounded calm and self-assured, as if he knew Johnny had seen the papers.

By eleven A.M., the boys sat on a green bench, finishing the last of their franks and root beers. Johnny was aware that the familiar boredom, the sense of stillness and emptiness, had set in again, same as ever, despite the fact that they were finally going on vacation—tomorrow. Grant plainly wasn't going to talk to him about what he'd done. That was wisest, of course.

A very fat girl with two younger girls came walking by, each slurping an ice-cream cone.

Johnny nodded toward the fat girl. "That's for you, Grant."

Smiling, Grant made as if to sock him.

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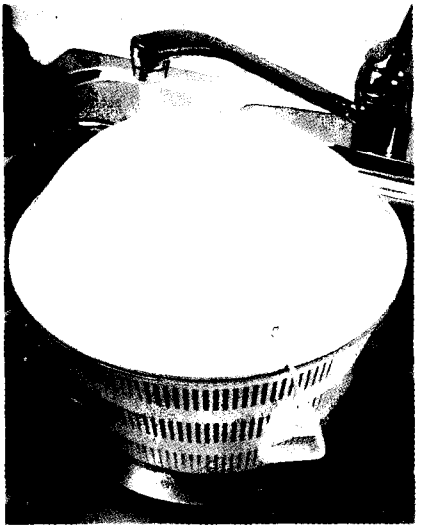

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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

Good craftsmanship, poignant observations, and a satisfying twist at the end are what we expect from Donald Olson. He's in good form here, and there's more to come later this year . . .

UNDER A GIANT EYE

by DONALD OLSON

At thirty-two Kate MacKenzie was well enough pleased with herself except in two areas: a plumpness which no diet seemed to discourage and a propensity to be accident prone. Her husband Clifford was more direct. "Face it, darling," he would tease her, "you're a klutz."

It was true, she was, had always been. She was forever breaking dishes, tripping on rugs, stubbing toes, and twisting ankles. She hated being such a stumblebum but had learned to make a joke of it, which probably accounted for her saying the wrong thing when someone knocked on the door one morning shortly after they'd moved into the new apartment.

Before answering she quickly rummaged about for a pair of dark glasses to hide the shiner resulting from a collision with a closet door, but things were still in such disarray she could not immediately lay her hands on them. She opened the door to face a slim, nondescript, mousy-haired man of about forty who smiled apologetically even as, with a flickering glance, he noticed the black eye.

He introduced himself as Peter Grant. "Your neighbor in two sixteen. Sorry to bother you, but I wonder if I might borrow a cup of laundry detergent."

"Oh, sure," said Kate, taking the plastic cup he handed her. "Come in. I'm Kate MacKenzie. We just moved in a few days ago."

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She left him standing in the living room while she fetched the detergent. "This be enough? You're welcome to take the box with you."

"This is fine, thanks. I'll be sure to put it on my shopping list." And then, as if he thought it might be strange not to, he expressed a word of concern. "That's a real beaut. Does it hurt?"

"Not much," Kate said breezily. "I'm used to things like this." She added with a grin: "My husband simply *must* learn to control his temper."

It was the sort of quip she was used to making to people who knew her, but when she saw the sudden change in Peter Grant's expression—not so much surprise or sympathy as outright anger—she realized she'd made a mistake.

"Only joking," she said quickly.

"Sure."

"No, really. Like a clumsy oaf I ran into a closet door."

He regarded her with a look of strained embarrassment. "You don't have to explain, Mrs. MacKenzie, I understand."

Kate felt like an idiot and decided Peter Grant wasn't so bright himself. Was he one of those humorless people who took everything you said literally?

"Mr. Grant, please don't go out of here thinking I'm married to a brute. I really *did* hit my eye on a closet door. I'm always doing stupid things like that."

His expression didn't change. "Well, just remember I'm only two doors away. I mean if you should need me. Don't be afraid to ask for help, night or day."

"Mr. Grant—"

"Peter. We're neighbors."

"If you knew me better, you'd know I've got a crazy sense of humor. I was *kidding,* for heaven's sake. Clifford's a very gentle person, take my word for it, he would never dream of hitting me." Oh gosh, she thought, why am I *explaining* to this jerk? Let him think what he wants.

Peter Grant smiled a sad, forbearing smile. "Sorry, I just get so burned up when I know some guy's abusing his wife. I lost my own wife recently, so I guess I'm sensitive about things like that."

Something in Peter Grant's manner, a sort of subdued tension, made Kate uneasy. "I'm sorry, but I know you'll like Clifford when you meet him. He's a bank auditor and hates violence of any kind."

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"Oh, don't worry, I won't make a pest of myself. I wouldn't want to make things worse for you."

"Worse for me?"

"Unreasoning jealousy is what sets most husbands off."

Clifford took one look at Kate's eye when he arrived home that evening and philosophically wagged his head. "Okay, so what was it this time? Thought you said you were going to turn over a new leaf when we moved here."

"More likely I'd trip over it." Kate ruefully explained what had happened but lacked the nerve to tell him about Peter Grant's visit and that ludicrous misunderstanding. Clifford was always telling her she was asking for trouble with that quirky sense of humor of hers.

As it happened, she didn't have to ask for it; it came looking for her. Leaving the supermarket a few days later with an armful of groceries, Kate didn't notice the step down to the sidewalk; she caught herself before falling, but in the process wrenched her right ankle painfully. By the time she got home it was already swelling and she could scarcely hobble to the front door.

"Oh golly, you poor *dear*. Let me help you."

Kate looked up to see one of the other tenants, a shapely young woman with peach-colored hair and over-painted lips. Her wrists jangled with bracelets as she rushed on spike heels, which would have been an invitation to disaster had Kate worn them, to help Kate into the building.

"Hiya, love, I'm Polly Dixon. Here, gimme those bags and lean on me. You're in two twenty, right? I'm just down the hall."

Kate murmured words of gratitude and once inside the apartment subsided onto the nearest chair.

"I'll just put these in the kitchen," chirped Polly Dixon, jingling and jangling across the room.

"Thanks a million," said Kate. "I'm really a walking catastrophe. I guess the only answer is to hire a maid and stay in bed all day."

Polly Dixon's skillfully elongated eyes drifted with greedy curiosity from Kate's ankle to the discolored eye. "You poor lamb. But believe me, honey, I know what it's like. I've been there. My first husband was a gorilla. Now it's none of my business and I'd be the last one to butt in, but let me give you a friendly word of advice. *Don't* suffer in silence. It ain't worth it, love. You—"

"Polly—"

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"—take my word for it, these brutes never change. They're sickies. I know whereof I speak. I've been there. I—"

"Polly! What on earth are you talking about? I twisted my ankle coming out of the supermarket."

"Sure, honey, of course you did. And you got that shiner running into a closet door."

Kate stared in astonishment. "Yes. How did you know?"

"I was chatting with that nice Mr. Grant. Not that I make a habit of being chummy with every unattached guy who moves in here, but you know, two people on their own like him and me . . . "

"Did Peter Grant tell you my husband gave me this black eye?"

"Well, don't be mad at *him,* honey, he only wants to help. He's a widower, you know. Lost his own wife. Some sort of sudden tragedy, or so I gathered from what little he's said. Now my advice to you—"

"My advice to *you,"* snapped Kate, "is not to listen to rubbish like that. I jokingly told Peter Grant that my husband had bopped me—big el mistako—and he *believed* me. No matter what I said he refused to believe otherwise. Frankly, I think the guy's got a problem."

Kate was now feeling such a mixture of pain and exasperation that she couldn't be bothered with good manners and said she was tired and wanted to rest. "And you can tell the scandalmongers my husband doesn't mistreat me. I'm all thumbs and have two left feet and this sort of thing happens all the time."

Kate couldn't believe it. She'd lived in apartment houses, what seemed an endless string of them, for the past four years, long enough to know they were hotbeds of gossip, but this was too much. She soaked her foot in salt water, took a couple of aspirins, and lay down. She was still resting when Clifford came home.

"Sorry, darling," she said. "You'll have to be chief cook and bottle washer tonight. Miss Twinkletoes has done it again. Tripped coming out of the supermarket."

Clifford tenderly explored the ankle with his fingertips. "Not sprained, but the color matches your eye nicely."

"Oh darling, why must I be such an oaf?"

"Just unlucky, I guess." He laughed. "By the way, have you met that little old lady in one ten?"

Kate hadn't. Clifford said: "I wonder if she's a bit gaga. I said hello to her in the hall and you know what she did? This'll kill you. Stared me straight in the eye and said, clear as anything and in a nasty tone: 'Brute.' And walked right past me."

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Kate rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "Her, *too?*" She had no choice but to tell Clifford the whole story. He was not amused. In fact, he was furious.

"There's just one way to nip that sort of malicious twaddle in the bud." He walked toward the door.

"Clifford? What are you going to do?"

"I'm having a word with your Mr. Grant."

Five minutes later he was back wearing a smile of grim satisfaction. "I don't think Mr. Peter Grant will spread any more gossip."

"What happened?"

"I told him off good and proper. Said if he spread any more vicious slander I'd give him a black eye to match yours."

"You said *what?* Oh my God, don't you know what that sounds like? It's almost like admitting you did strike me."

"Nonsense. He got the message."

If so, he clearly misunderstood it. Peter Grant came knocking at the door three mornings later. He thrust a bunch of red roses into Kate's hand. "Peace offering," he said. "May I come in?"

"Actually, I'm rather busy right now."

"Just for a minute. Please?"

He came in looking sheepish and subdued. "Look, I couldn't be sorrier for any trouble I may have caused you, Kate. I hope he didn't take it out on you." His moist gray eyes inspected Kate as if for fresh bruises.

"Mr. Grant, if you came to apologize, fine, but if you're still harboring delusions that my husband is a brute then please leave. I thought Clifford made it clear to you—"

"Did he ever. Wow, that guy's got a vicious temper."

"Only when very strongly provoked."

"He threatened me. Look, I'm sorry if he's got you so intimidated you don't dare say boo, but I can't help worrying about you. It's really uncanny how much you remind me of my wife. I sometimes blame myself for Harriet's death. If I hadn't neglected her the way I did, maybe she wouldn't have gone looking for affection from other guys."

Kate gave up. The man was incorrigible. "Mr. Grant, I'm sorry about your wife. I'm sorry you've got a guilt complex about her, but please don't burden me with it. I don't *need* your sympathy. Now if you'll excuse me, I must get busy." She pushed the roses back into his hands. "I suggest you give these to your friend Polly Dixon. I'm sure she'll be more appreciative."

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Peter Grant took the rebuff with a knowing smile. "Maybe you're right, Kate. About the roses, I mean. Your husband might get the wrong idea."

On Monday Kate ran into Polly Dixon in the laundry room.

"Everything okay, love?" Polly inquired.

"Just dandy, thank you." Kate turned her back and started sorting her laundry.

"What happened to your wrist?"

Kate stifled the rude retort that sprang to her lips. "I was removing a pie from the oven. I'm still not used to it. Burned my wrist on the rack."

Polly came around to face her. "Oh gosh, there's nothing as painful as a burn. You see a doctor?"

"For this? Don't be silly."

"I don't mean to pry, Kate, but when did all this start?"

"All what?"

"These—accidents."

"The day I fell out of my crib."

Polly gave her a long, deep look. "You're a martyr, Kate. A real martyr."

"No, that was Joan of Arc. All *I* did was pink my wrist on the oven."

"Do you think your husband would consider marriage counseling?"

Kate slammed the lid of the washing machine and leveled her stoniest glare at Polly Dixon. "No, but I'm seriously considering murder."

And that, she thought, leaving the room, was probably the wrong thing to say; her remark would probably be interpreted as meaning she was ready to murder Clifford.

Upstairs, Kate made herself a cup of tea and reflected upon the state of the world. Of course it was her own joke to Peter Grant that had started all this, but had everyone become so paranoid they saw the appearance of evil where none existed? Must even the saintliest of old men be suspected of the unspeakable if he patted a child's head in the park? Must the police be rung if a youth with only poetic thoughts in his mind should loiter in front of one's house after dark? Must one be so aware of all those surveillance devices in stores that one hesitated to open one's purse for a tissue for fear of being suspected of shoplifting? What lay at the root of all this present-day

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mistrust and suspicion? Of course terrible things did happen, but must there be this poisonous atmosphere of distrust to taint the quality of life?

"So the guy lost his wife and somehow feels responsible," Kate said to Clifford that night at dinner, "why try to atone for his guilt feelings by acting protective towards me? Why didn't he pick on Polly Dixon?"

"I agree," said Clifford, deftly carving the roast. "Being the subject of gossip is the last thing we need. Thank God we won't be staying here very long."

"Work going all right?"

"No problems."

Kate regarded him with loving admiration. "You're so clever and I'm such a clumsy dunce."

"I wouldn't have you any other way."

"Because *you* enjoy feeling protective, too?"

"I've not done such a bad job so far, have I?"

"Indeed not. But I do wish we could escape from this rat race. Retire to some small town where we can avoid the busybodies and live a normal life."

"Maybe after Philadelphia. They liked my résumé and the internal auditor's position is opening up in two weeks."

Kate had never been a worrier—she left that to Clifford, but now all this unwelcome attention was beginning to disturb her. She had met Clifford when she was working as a teller in a Sandusky, Ohio bank; she had no family and her shyness was not conducive to making close friends. That a man so handsome and smart and fun to be with had found her, for whatever reason, attractive had given her the confidence she'd always lacked. When Clifford quit his auditor's job at the bank and asked her to marry him and go with him to a bordering state where he'd found a better position, Kate had immediately agreed, and had never regretted the decision. At first she had not understood Clifford's expressed fears of getting bogged down in a dead-end job, hence the constant moves. He'd used phrases like "upward mobility" and "master game plan," and when she finally learned what all this meant, that the end result would be a lifestyle they both aspired to, Kate was quite willing to remain supportive and left the worrying to Clifford. But now . . .

Kate found it nearly impossible to leave the building without running into one or another of the tenants and their furtive glances

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of commiseration. Polly Dixon was more outspoken.

"Things any better, love?" she inquired in a loud stage whisper as Kate passed her in the hall. Kate gritted her teeth. How she deplored the terms of endearment that tripped off the tongues of virtual strangers. I am not your *love,* she felt like retorting.

"So far as I know, trouble's still brewing in the Middle East."

"You *know* what I mean."

"If you mean what I think you mean, I suggest you stop watching whatever talk shows are feeding your absurd fantasies."

What Kate found so disturbing was that all this misguided concern was affecting her with the same paranoia, as if there might be something sinister about it, something conspiratorial. Was it mere chance that had brought Peter Grant knocking on her door that day with what now seemed a flimsily transparent excuse to borrow a cup of detergent? Why her door? Why not Polly Dixon's? Kate upbraided herself for harboring such manifestly illogical suspicions, yet could not altogether dismiss them.

"I know I don't usually talk like this," she said to Clifford, "but this place gives me bad vibes. I wish we hadn't come here."

"Won't be much longer," he assured her. "Philadelphia beckons, and we must heed the call. There are those who rely upon us."

Clifford made "those" sound like unenlightened pagans and themselves like missionaries, which somehow did not amuse Kate as once it might have.

All Kate's unspoken fears seemed about to be made real when the police came to their door two nights later.

"We've had a report about some domestic trouble here," said one of the officers, directing what seemed a baleful look at Clifford.

"You mean here in the building?" Kate asked.

"I mean between you and your husband, ma'am. Care to tell us about it? Nothing to be afraid of."

Before Clifford could say a word Kate unleashed her fury. "Yes! Yes, I would like to tell you about it. I most certainly would. I don't know what that lunatic can be charged with, but there must be something." With that, she related all that had happened since Peter Grant had first come to the door. The upshot of it all was that the officers agreed to have a talk with Grant before taking any further action.

* * *

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"To think of it!" cried Polly Dixon when Kate met her downstairs the next morning. "A murderer! Right here in our own building. And he seemed such a meek little man. I still can't believe it."

"I can," said Kate. "I thought from the start there was something creepy about him."

"The cops actually *told* you he'd murdered his wife in Baltimore three years ago?"

"And they've been looking for him ever since. Apparently his picture's been in every police station in the country. Peter Grant's not his real name. He must already have been cracking up when he moved in here. Couldn't live with his own guilt, which probably triggered this delusion about *my* husband mistreating me. I know, it sounds screwy; maybe only a psychiatrist could explain it."

Polly looked genuinely contrite. "You're an angel to forgive me for being so gullible. But then if I hadn't called the cops, they might never have caught up with that fiend."

To Clifford, Kate admitted she was glad it had happened, saying it probably took something like this to shake them out of their complacency. "When those policemen came to the door I felt sure it was to arrest us."

The experience had scared Clifford just as badly. "I called our friend and told him we're through after Philadelphia. The ride is over, honey. We're getting off."

Only the easy money and the seemingly minor risk had kept him at it so long. After all, Clifford was not directly involved in any of the bank robberies. In his job as auditor or bookkeeper or market analyst he could case each bank he worked at, gleaning information about its assets, its alarm systems, and any other data useful to the mastermind who had recruited him back there in Sandusky; long before the actual heist Clifford would be far away, established in a similar position at some other bank.

"You never did intend to make a career of it," said Kate.

"I promise you, darling, just this one more job and we're out."

His words failed to dispel Kate's foreboding that this one more job would be one too many. The world wasn't what it used to be. It had become a technological booby trap. And all this mistrust, all this paranoid suspiciousness, so very unsettling to the mind. It was as if they were living under the giant eye of some invisible, all-seeing surveillance camera watching their every move.

As, in a manner of speaking, it very likely was. ●

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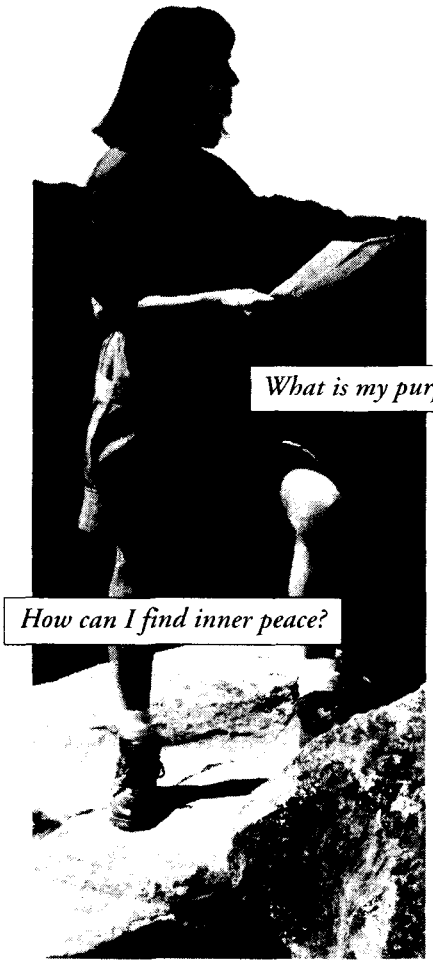

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a ***NEW*** short story by

DOUG ALLYN

Doug Allyn's November 1992 story "Candles in the Rain" will be remembered at EQMM *for a long time to come. In addition to winning the 1992* EQMM *Readers Award, the story received nominations for both the Edgar and Anthony Awards for Best Short Story. Now, to complete the huzzahs, "Candles in the Rain" has been named the winner of the American Mystery Award for Best Short Story. But Mr. Allyn does not rest on his laurels. With each new story he tries to expand his horizons, and in "Fire Lake" he provides an interesting twist on a classic mystery theme . . .*

FIRE LAKE

by DOUG ALLYN

The speed limit on the two-lane blacktop was the usual northern Michigan double nickel, but Cass kept the rental Buick well below that, a cautious forty to forty-five. Weaving through the pine-covered hills in the gathering dusk, he had the windows down, the dashboard radio murmuring generic country music.

He was afraid he might miss the turnoff in the dark, but he needn't have worried. In the ten years since he'd been here, the county'd put up a new road sign. Fire Lake, eleven miles.

Too bad they hadn't dropped a few dollars repairing the road while they were at it. The backwoods blacktop was a lumpy patchwork of tar and gravel repairs. Theoretically it was wide enough for two vehicles to pass abreast, but Cass was damned glad there was no traffic.

He slowed to a crawl at the single-lane suspension bridge over Miles Creek, wondering if the rusty Erector Set relic from the last

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century would support the Buick's weight. It did, but he had the feeling if he'd had six beers on the backseat the bridge might've crumpled like a gum wrapper and dumped him seventy feet into rocky shadows below.

It was well after dark when he cruised through the village itself. Fire Lake, population 387. It was even smaller than he remembered: a block-long business district, Glen's Supermart at one end, a Sunoco station at the other. The old Woolworth store housed a flea market now. Pickett's Drugstore was missing altogether, apparently burned and not rebuilt. Weeds grew amid the charred rubble of its foundation.

He wondered for the umpteenth time what possessed his father to retire up here in the middle of nowhere. How could anybody spend a week in this town without going stir crazy . . .

Or maybe he had. Maybe the doctors were wrong and it wasn't Alzheimer's at all. A few weeks away from this place and the old man might remember who he was and . . . Yeah. Right. He mashed the Buick's gas pedal at the village limit sign, charging over the last few miles of worm-track backroad up Mount Miles at seventy miles an hour. Somewhere along the way he scared a rattletrap station wagon off the road. Too damn bad.

He missed the cottage driveway in the dark, had to make a U-turn and read the mailbox. K. Novak. He turned in, pulled up to the cottage in the dark, dropped his suitcase in the tiny living room, found a beer in the fridge, and carried it out on the back deck facing the beach. Fire Lake was an ancient bronze mirror, reflecting the monstrous shape of the mountaintop looming over it in the dark. No breeze, not a ripple, not a sound. Timeless. Not even another light along the northern shore. Maybe this kind of solitude was what his father wanted. Well, he had it now. Lost in his own memories, or what was left of them.

Odd, though, that there were no lights on the far shore. It was late October, well past tourist season, but surely someone besides his dad lived on the lake year-round. Or maybe not. Maybe they had better sense.

His father's single bed was made up in his small, monastic room. Cass unrolled his sleeping bag atop it, preferring to make as little mess as possible. He stretched out, dog-tired from the long drive up from Detroit. Normally he crashed—instant oblivion ten seconds after his head hit a pillow. Not tonight. He kept waking up. And listening. Eventually he realized it wasn't noises that were rousing

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him, it was silence. No car horns, no boom box thump or truck rumble. No symphony of Motown street sounds. Peace and quiet, his dad called it. But it felt unnatural to Cass. A cemetery peace. Dead quiet.

He woke early, edgy. The sun was barely over the foothills of Miles Mountain to the east, casting long black saber shadows that stretched toward the lake like fingers. He knew it was beautiful, the russet trees, the rolling hills, but ten years of craziness in the Detroit TV news market made him see it as just another shot. A background shot at that, for weather reports or area news. Not that there'd be any news from this backwater.

He made a pot of strong coffee, toasted a couple of frozen English muffins he found in the fridge, and toured the cottage, munching as he went. Northwoods crude. Hardwood floors, knotty-pine walls. Bedroom, living room, bath, kitchen, and utility/mud room, which held the water heater and a pair of chest-high waders.

Very few personal items. A clock from their old house in Warsaw Heights. A picture of his mom and dad a few years before she died. An engraved General Motors beer mug the old man got after twenty-five years at Truck and Bus. Just before they folded the plant. His dad had moved up here to work at the local pulp mill as a machinist, commuting the hundred forty miles home to the Heights on weekends. After his mom died, Cass stayed with an aunt to finish high school. His father sold the house in the Heights and came back less often. Cass spent his high school summers here at Fire Lake. He made a few good friends, but basically the place had bored him even then.

The bottom line? The sum of his father's labor added up to these few shabby rooms. He'd sweated his whole life at jobs he disliked to earn a retirement in this place. And that was as sad an epitaph as Cass could think of.

The complete tour took less than ten minutes. He still had a couple of hours to kill before the realty office in the village opened, so he slipped on a windbreaker and wandered down to the lakeshore. The waves were slapping gently, rhythmically on the stony shore. The water had a faint coppery tint from the iron deposits on the mountain. Sometimes at dusk, when the last light of the dying sun struck the water just so, the waves would suddenly seem to kindle into flame. A blazing lake of fire. And thus the name. Or so his father said. Cass had never seen it.

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There was a light chop farther out, a few inches, no more. A fishing boat was futzing along the far shore, the first sign of life Cass had seen all morning.

His father's own boat was beached nearby, a battered eighteen-foot aluminum basser with an old thirty-five-horse Evinrude outboard motor still mounted. The boat wasn't even chained up. Nor had the cabin been locked. No need. Up here everybody knew everybody and there was damn little to steal anyway.

On a whim, Cass checked the gas tank, then slid the boat down the stony bank into the water, scrambling aboard at the last moment. The outboard fired up at the first crank and he wheeled the craft around and gunned it away from the shore. He cruised along the shoreline, motor chuckling quietly. He was hoping to spot a neighbor to talk to, maybe get an idea of local real-estate values, but there was no one around. The widely scattered cottages were all closed up for the season, or forever from the shabby, rundown look of them.

Not good. If he couldn't get a decent price for his dad's place, he had no idea how he'd manage the fees at the rest home. With TV networks all cutting back their news departments, his job was hanging by a thread. . . .

He was startled out of his funk by the throaty roar of a boat coming toward him, fast. It was fair-sized, a twenty-two-foot Bayliner with a serious engine, the same boat he'd noticed earlier on the far shore.

The Bayliner heeled half over as the driver gunned her up alongside, nearly swamping the bass boat. Cass hung on for dear life to keep from getting bucked out. The boater was an oversized, grimy Viking in a faded flannel shirt, a Ford tractor cap crammed down over greasy shoulder-length hair. One of the Kraniak brothers. Harry, maybe. Sweet Jesus, just what he needed.

"Hey, you! What the hell you doin' in that boat?" Kraniak yelled. He was burlier than Cass remembered, a watermelon gut strained his shirt buttons, but otherwise the same, a pushy loudmouth with a half-dozen surly brothers to back him.

"It's my dad's boat, Harry," Cass said. "How you been?"

Kraniak stood up in the stern of his boat and peered beerily at Cass. "Cashew? That you? Damned if it ain't. Seen your dad's boat, figured somebody might be rippin' it off. What you doin' up here?"

"Just looking around," Cass said. "A lot of places seem to be closed for the season."

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"Mostly gone for good," Kraniak grunted. "Fishin's been dogcrap the past few years, people been movin' out. You ain't thinkin' about movin' back up here, are ya?"

"Not likely."

"Good. Ain't enough fishin' to go 'round as it is. Anyway, you never did belong up here, city boy. Hill country's too rough for people who don't know what they're doin'."

"It looks peaceful enough to me," Cass said, glancing around.

"That's what ol' Sweetcheeks thought. Remember him? That fag math teacher used to run the boy scouts?"

"Mr. Sweet? What about him?"

"Ain't so sweet now. Drowned last spring. My brother Earl found him floatin' half a mile out. All swole up like a dead carp and smelled even worse, Earl said."

"Sorry to hear it," Cass said warily. "Maybe I should head back in."

"Good idea. You better not use the boat anymore, neither. One of my dumbass brothers might figure you was stealin' it, drop a hammer on ya by mistake. We look out for our own, you know? See ya around, city boy." He gunned the Bayliner away with a roar, leaving the basser rocking and bucking in his wake.

"Jerk," Cass muttered. But he said it quietly. So quietly he could barely hear it himself.

Halfway through the village he stomped the Buick's brakes without even knowing why he hit them. He hesitated, then pulled up behind a silver '68 Pontiac GTO and parked. There, next to the hardware store, a shingle hanging above a door. Thos. Vanderlan, Jr., Atty. at Law.

Cass trotted across the sidewalk and took the narrow stairs two at a time. The door at the top was open. A pudgy Pillsbury doughboy in a white shirt and rep tie glanced up from an old desk in the middle of the office.

Cass grinned. *"Jak się masz,* Tommy. How you been?"

"Cass? I'll be damned!" Tommy Vanderlan said, rising and coming around the desk. They started to shake hands, hesitated, then embraced, long and hard.

"Jesus, it's good to see a friendly face," Cass said, stepping back, looking Tommy over. He was forty pounds heavier, and his baby-fine blond hair was combed up to conceal a bald spot, but the open,

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Dutch-apple-pie smile was the same. "I was beginning to wonder if any of the old gang were left."

"Not many," Tommy said, resting a plump haunch on the edge of his desk. "In fact, I'm just about the last. Not much shakin' in the old town anymore."

"Never was much," Cass grunted, walking to the window, looking down on the empty street. "I'm surprised you're still here."

Tommy shrugged. "I inherited my dad's practice when he retired. I do the legal work for the Miles Mill, and there's enough local business to keep me afloat. Barely."

"You seem to be doing okay. Is that your old GTO down in front? The silver one?"

"The very one. Had it restored to original last year. My midlife crisis treat."

"You're not old enough for a midlife crisis."

"Speak for yourself," Tommy snorted. "I sure as hell feel old enough. You heard my marriage broke up, right?"

"No," Cass said, "I didn't know. What happened?"

"Carol left me. Took off to find herself. Last I heard she was looking in California."

"Sorry to hear it," Cass said.

"It happens"—Tommy shrugged—"about half the time nowadays. I'm surprised your dad didn't tell you."

"No, he's been pretty drifty the last few years, and lately he's gotten a lot worse. Some days he doesn't remember who I am. Or even who he is. I'm going to have to put him in a home."

"Sometimes it comes down to that," Tommy said, wincing in sympathy. "That why you're back?"

"Yeah, I've got power of attorney to sell his cottage. He had a letter from a local real-estate broker offering him forty grand for it a few months ago. I thought it was low until I looked around. The area looks pretty run down."

"It's hard times in the high country all right. The pulp mill's the only employer left around here, and they've been cutting back. A lot of people have left."

"Seems funny, though. I mean, that lake's gotta be one of the prettiest spots on the planet. People used to live there year around."

"Things change," Tommy said mildly.

"Some don't. I ran into one of the Kraniaks on the lake. Harry, I think. He's as big a jerk as ever."

"Give you any trouble?"

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"Just a little guff. Why?"

"Hell, you know how they are. Pushy as Dobermans on speed, the lot of 'em, especially lately."

"Why lately?"

"Who knows with that bunch. You're going to sell the cottage, then?"

"I'm not sure. To be honest, I'm afraid to. If my dad gets better and finds out I sold his house he'll kill me."

"I didn't know people got better from Alzheimer's."

"They're not positive that's what it is. They're still running tests."

"Running up your bill, you mean." Tommy snorted.

"Possibly," Cass agreed. "I definitely need the money, his care is costing an arm and a leg. But I hate having to sell, you know? Maybe it's guilt. My dad and I were never close, especially after my mom died. And that was my fault. He was just a shop rat, a working stiff. A chump, in my enlightened view."

"So you were a punk kid. We all were."

"True, but now that I've been around the block once or twice and know how tough it is to make it in this world, it's too late to tell him. . . . Well, you know what I mean."

"So you're going to punish yourself by hanging onto a cabin you have no earthly use for?"

"I don't know. You're an attorney. What should I do?"

"You haven't changed a bit, you know that? When we were kids you were always getting into jams and pulling me in with you."

Cass grinned. "I'll admit trouble's always held a certain appeal for me. And I guess you did jam yourself up once or twice trying to save my butt, but how do you figure I'm trouble this time?"

"Because as an attorney, my duty's to my clients. But you're not a client, you're an old friend. Which puts me in a bind, ethicswise. You do know what a conflict of interest is?"

"Sure. It's what politicians do for a living. So?"

"My office door was open when you came up, right? So let's say you happened to overhear me talking on the phone."

"About what?"

"A landfill," Tommy said grimly. "A big one. They've already bought out most of the landowners in the Miles Mountain hills. Your dad was one of the last holdouts."

"A garbage dump? Up here?"

"Exactly. In a backwoods county where money's tight, voters are few, and work's so scarce we'd probably welcome a Buchenwald

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franchise if they paid a buck over minimum wage."

"I see," Cass said slowly. "So you think I should sell?"

"I can't advise you." Tommy smiled. "It'd be unethical. I'm just talking to myself, you just happen to be listening. But you missed the point. Since your dad's place is one of the last, it's possible that if I phone the realty office and say you're demanding double what they offered, they'll go for it."

"Why should they?"

"Because their local attorney, namely me, will tell 'em you're a city boy with delusions of grandeur. And I'll advise them to pay you off."

"I see," said Cass slowly. "And what would you want for your end?"

Tommy stared at him blankly a moment as a rosy flush of anger rose slowly from his collar. "My," he said at last, "you have been gone a long time, haven't you? I can't believe you asked me that."

"Sorry. I guess I've been in the news business too long. But I don't want you to get in a bind trying to help me out either."

"I won't have a problem unless one of us rats. You gonna fink on me, ol' buddy?"

"No," Cass said. "Not likely."

It was after eleven when Cass made his way thoughtfully down to the street. He walked around Tommy's silver GTO once, admiring it, remembering the good times they'd had in it. Tommy'd been his best friend the summers he'd stayed up here with his dad. His only friend, really. They'd done everything together, movies, mischief, double dates. Carol and Tommy were going steady even then. Puppy love in a white heat.

But the old days were gone now. And Carol was off finding herself. And Tommy . . . had changed a lot too. Because in the old days they'd always been straight with each other. And Cass was fairly sure Tommy had lied to him about the cottage.

Channel 57's news department had done a story on landfills a year or so back, an in-depth piece with heavy background research.

Point the first, a year ago there were no new landfills slated for Fire Lake or anywhere else north of the Midland line. It was just too damned far to haul the refuse. Those big mother trucks drink a lot of fuel.

Point two, landfill developers never buy property outright. They option it while they wait for the EPA to okay their permits. If the

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permits don't clear, the corporation's only out the option money, chump change to them.

If the permits are approved, the homeowners will settle for whatever they can get. Nobody wants a dump for a neighbor. Bottom line, landfills seldom even pay market price for real estate. So why should Tommy volunteer to double the realtor's offer?

A gust of October wind nudged him gently and he went with it, strolling down the street to a run-down cement-block building. A plywood Fire Lake Village Office sign hung over the door.

A one-room office, oil stove in the far corner, a couple of metal desks. A sad-eyed woman in a shapeless dress glanced up as he came in. She wore a dun-colored cardigan draped across her stooped shoulders like the weight of the world.

"Help ya?"

"I hope so. I'd like to see a plat book for the county, one that shows any recent property sales."

"You'll have to read it here," she grumbled, placing a heavy ring binder on the counter. "It's as up to date as I got time to make it."

Cass riffled quickly through the pages till he found the south shore of Fire Lake. And there it was. But it made no sense at all.

"Ma'am, can you help me out here? All this lakeshore property that says Miles on it. Is that the same Miles family that owns the pulp mill?"

"They're the only ones around here I know," the clerk said sourly. "They pick up property on the lake pretty regular."

"So I see. But they've been selling too, higher up. To Varney Kraniak? According to this the Kraniaks own most of the mountain now."

"If you say so." She shrugged.

"So what happened? Varney strike oil up there or something?"

"I generally don't ask the Kraniaks a whole lot about their business," she said curtly. "I just register deeds, keep the tax rolls, and issue building permits. Any other questions?"

"Just one. Have you issued many building permits lately?"

"Building permits? Around here? You've gotta be kidding."

"Not even to Mr. Kraniak?"

"Like I said, I don't—"

"—ask Mr. Kraniak about his business, right." Cass nodded, closing the book. "You've been a big help, ma'am. I'll mention it to Mr. Kraniak when I see him. Have a nice day."

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"Hey, wait a minute," she called after him uneasily, but he was already out the door.

As he walked back to his car, a mud-spattered Ford four-wheel-drive pickup suddenly swerved at him, blasting its horn. He flattened against the wall, but it was only crazy Harry Kraniak and a couple of his brothers fooling around. The shotgun rider cackled and flipped him the finger as they roared past. Two scruffy kids and a bluetick hound were riding in the back of the truck. One of the kids had a dull-eyed stare. Mentally impaired. Maybe the local jokes about Kraniaks inbreeding because no one else would have 'em weren't so farfetched.

He mulled it over on the drive back to the cottage. For an area so economically depressed, a lot of land had been changing hands. The Kraniak clan had apparently bought up the whole top of the mountain from the Miles Corporation, a fair-sized purchase.

Farther down, the corporation had been acquiring lakefront property, a lot of it. His dad's place was one of the last pieces they didn't own. On the map the area looked like a rough target now. The Kraniaks owned the center ring, the Miles Corporation owned the land around them and the lake.

A landfill? No chance. The feds would never allow one so near open water. So what else could it be? A recreational development of some sort? That would explain why the Miles family was buying up the lakefront. They were committed to the area, they'd been Fire Lake's primary employer since. . . . Hell, since the last century, when the town had grown up around the iron mines. . . . On the mountain. The land the Kraniaks owned now.

But if the Miles family intended to develop the lake, why wasn't anything going on? They already owned most of it, and time is money.

Money. That was another puzzle. The Kraniaks had always been dirt poor, scraping out a living cutting pulpwood and poaching. If they'd raised cash to buy land, there must be something valuable on it. And maybe, just maybe, his dad's place was worth serious cash. If he could figure out what was up.

The key to it all had to be on the mountain. Maybe the Kraniaks found something up there and bought the land before the Miles family realized what they had. And now the corporation was scrambling to recoup by buying up everything around them. So what the hell was up there? Gold? Oil? There must be something.

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He hadn't been up the mountain since he and Tommy had snuck up to the old mine when they were kids. Maybe it was time for another visit.

He waited till well after dark, then set out, walking along the rocky lakeshore. The boat would have been quicker, but too visible on the mirror of the water. And much too noisy in the graveyard silence.

Even the soggy crunch of his tennis shoes on the shore seemed loud. But there was no one to hear. The cottages were ghostly shapes in the shadows, with windows like blinded eyes.

He tried to remember what the lake was like in those long-ago summers. A few vacationers, mostly elderly. Probably dead by now. Or missing, like his father.

He found the dirt road that led up to the mine easily enough, it was the only trail up the mountain. But somehow he felt uneasy walking on it, even in the faint glow of the quarter moon. As he approached the cutoff that led to the Kraniak's cluster of shacks, he left the road, circling wide to the west to avoid the area, and then continued his climb.

The ground was steeper now, slick with lichens and pine needles. The scraggly red pines made excellent cover, but their slender branches brushed and tugged at his clothing at odd moments, startling him. Warning him.

An hour into the climb he spotted a light a half mile or so below. It seemed to be flickering, moving perhaps. Then it disappeared. Probably just a light from one of the Kraniak's shacks showing through the trees. Still, it made him edgy to realize how close they were. The Kraniaks were surly and pushy enough in town, spoiling for trouble like it was a calling. If they caught him on their ground? In the dark? He picked up his pace.

Eventually he worked his way back down to the mine road, and trotted along in the dark. He'd brought a flashlight, but didn't need it. The moon was enough. Or he thought it was. Until he tripped over a shadow, and went sprawling headlong down a shallow decline. And realized he'd arrived.

The ground beneath him was heavily rutted with wagon and truck tracks that led to the mine entrance in the mountain face. The air was dank with an acrid, rotten-egg stench of hydrogen sulfide, the reek of the mountain's unhealed wounds. He brushed the leaves from his clothing and scanned the area.

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Too dark. He was in the shadow of the mountain here, a sheer cliff face that rose another hundred meters, blocking out the moon and starlight. He risked switching on the flashlight a moment, playing it around. Nothing. Grass and weeds grew thick in the old wheel ruts. A few scraps of trash were scattered about, broken tool handles, bits of rusted barrel hoops, debris that had been cast aside when the mine played out at the turn of the century.

Even the mine entrance was gone, buried under a thirty-foot mound of rubble. A section of the cliff face had collapsed and slid down from above. Or more likely had been blasted down, since it covered the entrance so neatly. But that's all there was to see. Grass, weeds, and rubble.

There was no sign of recent activity, no testing equipment or even the pit marks that testing leaves behind, no boreholes or dimples from seismic blasts. Nothing near the mine.

But there were tracks on the road. As he played the flashlight around he picked up tire marks in the dirt. Deep marks, like those a four-wheel-drive pickup would make. Only they didn't go anywhere. They cut a rough circle, as though someone drove up here, made a U-turn—

He caught a flicker of movement in the trees beside the road. He played the flashlight toward it, trying to pinpoint . . . A shot blasted out of the darkness, the slug ringing past his head so close he felt its heat.

My God! He recoiled, stumbling backward, dropping his flashlight, and damned lucky he did. Two quick shots tore into the ground near the light beam. Cass whirled and plunged blindly into the brush in the shadow of the mountain. Another shot cracked into the rocks to his left, ricocheting off into the dark. Then a light beam flared out of the trees, dancing along the cliff face, hunting him. He dove headlong into a tangle of stunted alders.

The light was coming from thirty or forty yards down the road. The shooter must have parked farther down and walked up. One of the Kraniaks? Probably. But whoever it was was dead serious. There'd been no warning, no questions. Just a shot that damn near took his head off. And they were moving in. The light was getting closer.

Two options. Give it up, and hope the shooter wouldn't blow him away. Or try for the trees. Then the light danced through the branches near his face and pure panic made the decision for him. He instinctively shied from it, scrabbling on his belly through the

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brush like a cockroach. The crunch of leaves and gravel sounded like an avalanche and he hoped to God the shooter was at least partially deafened by the blast. . . .

The ground dropped from beneath him.

He'd scrambled over the rim of what he thought was a ridge of some kind, but there was no bottom to it, and suddenly he was out of control, plunging down the steep slope of the mountainside west of the mine, tumbling through the scrub brush and rocks, terrified, not knowing what was below, a cliff or—

He slammed broadside into a stump and came to an instant halt. He huddled there, dazed, in agony, broken in half, the wind completely driven out of him. Then his breathing gradually started again. He was almost sorry it did. His ribs felt like a stomped wicker birdcage, all jagged edges and pain. He bit back a groan, kept his breathing as shallow as he could, then slowly shifted around to look back up the mountain.

The light was still up there, moving around, hunting him. But it was at least seventy yards above. The cliff face he'd tumbled down was a steep, boulder-studded incline. A few yards to his left it slanted away to a sheer drop. Sweet Jesus. He was lucky to be alive.

But it would take more than luck to stay that way.

The light disappeared above the rim. He thought he could hear voices up there, but his head was ringing so painfully he couldn't be sure. One thing he was sure of, he had to get the hell out of there. Anybody capable of blazing away at a shape in the dark was certainly capable of dumping him over a ledge and letting the mountain finish him off. And in his present shape, a girl scout in a body cast could do the job.

He forced himself to roll over, then got to his knees. And for a time that was as much as he could manage. He knelt there, head down, ribs afire, unable to catch his breath. But gradually the agony subsided a bit and he managed to stand.

But not upright. He was doubled over like a question mark, arms folded across his belly, hugging the pain. He tried a step, and another. Then stopped, gagging as a flood of hot bile surged up in his throat. He forced it down, then pushed on.

The walk down to the cottage was a never-ending nightmare. Each time his pain seemed to abate, he'd stumble into something in the dark and the splintered pitchforks of his ribs would pierce him again. But still he pressed on. The alternative was to die out here

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in the dark, or to be hunted down in the morning, helpless as a child.

He was completely lost at first, but at some point he sensed an opening off to the right and made his way toward it, hoping for easier going. And came out at the edge of a gleaming ebony mirror. Fire Lake. He thought he'd been moving straight down the mountain, but apparently he'd been circling. He was halfway along the north shore, roughly a mile from the cottage.

And then he heard a truck. He couldn't tell how far away it was. Sound can be tricky in the hills. Still, he kept well back from the shoreline, moving warily through the pines, circling the shuttered cottages without showing himself. When he neared his dad's place he left the shore altogether and cut through the trees. And almost blundered into the pickup truck in the dark.

It was parked in a cedar grove fifty yards from the cottage. Empty, thank God, and it hadn't been there very long. The hood was still warm. He risked opening the door a crack. No keys in it. Damn. Just as well. Banged up as he was, he was in no condition to handle the old truck anyway. And there was even less chance he would handle whoever drove it. So now what?

He moved slowly through the pines toward the cottage clearing. And got lucky. From inside the cottage he spotted the glow of a cigarette. They'd broken in and were waiting for him. In the dark.

He leaned his back against a tree, trying to think. No way he could walk much farther. His only chance was to get to the rented Buick. For a panicky moment he thought he might have left the car keys. . . .

No, he had them. Thank you, Jesus. But even if he got the car fired up without getting shot for his trouble, they'd run him down in short order. Unless he did something about it.

He circled back to the pickup truck, eased out of his shirt, and used it to muffle the hiss as he let the air out of two of the truck tires with a car key. Then he made his way back to the clearing, dropped to his knees, and crawled to the Buick.

He unlocked it, took a deep breath, then jerked the door open and slid in. It fired up immediately and he slammed it into reverse, backing wildly down the drive, banging off trees. He glimpsed two figures charging out of the cabin, but couldn't risk a look back, he was too busy trying to control the car.

Then he was at the end of the drive, cranking the wheel hard as he skidded out onto the road, the agony in his chest nearly making

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him black out. He kept the Buick on the centerline, focusing on the white lines flashing below, fighting to stay conscious. No good. He'd never find help out here and he'd never make it to the village like this. . . .

But he did. The first light of dawn was breaking as he rolled numbly to a halt at Fire Lake's lone stoplight. A ghost town. No sign of life. Even the streetlights were out. He turned left, running on autopilot now, and drove toward the only haven he could think of.

Tommy Vanderlan came down the carpeted stairway of his parents' home cautiously, belting a dark silk robe around his pudgy midriff. Cass had collapsed in an overstuffed armchair beside the fireplace. He was doubled nearly over, his face ashen.

"Sweet Jesus, Cass, what the hell happened?"

"I got shot at," Cass said. "One of the Kraniak clan, I think."

"Are you hit?" Tommy said, kneeling beside him.

"Not exactly. Think I may have busted a couple of ribs when I fell off the mountain."

"The mountain? What about the mountain? You're not making sense."

"A lot of things in this town don't make sense, Tommy. You lying to me, for instance. And your bosses at the Miles Corporation buying lakefront cottages and letting 'em rot. And the Kraniaks trying to kill me over a worthless mine that's been abandoned for a hundred damn years. Something's going on here, Tommy. News is my business now, I can smell it. So you might as well tell me about it. And don't bother blowing any more smoke about a landfill. The EPA'll put a dump on Mars before they okay one near an upland lake."

"Cass, please, I'll write you a check right now for your dad's place. Name your price, but take it and go. There's nothing that concerns you up here, I give you my word."

"Get real. Your word doesn't mean squat to me, Tommy. Not anymore. If you want me out of this, you'll have to level with me. I'm not a glutton for punishment. I'll probably just take the money and run. But when a guy offers me a blank check for a ramshackle cottage, I've gotta wonder what it's really worth."

"It's worth nothing," Tommy said grimly. "Less than nothing. You've got a vacation shack on the shore of a sewer, a northwoods version of Love Canal."

"What are you talking about?"

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"The old mine's been seeping into the lake for years. Heavy metal contaminants, mercury, lead, antimony. Just trace elements, you understand, nothing lethal. But apparently the levels have built up over time and now the water up there—isn't safe."

"Right," Cass said slowly. "The water's poisoned and the lakefront's worthless? So why is your boss buying it up?"

"We're buying time, that's all, moving people away from the problem. The mine's been closed since the turn of the century. If we get hit with a lawsuit by the EPA or some crackpot, our insurers will claim it was a preexisting condition and dump us. And that'd be the end of things up here. The corporation's barely scraping by. Any kind of a judgment or fine will finish us. Hell, the way those EPA bloodhounds are, the corporation officers could end up in jail."

"And you're not just their lawyer, are you? You're a corporation officer."

"My father and I both," Tommy conceded. "But we're not the only ones at risk. If the mill folds, the town'll die. Three hundred jobs gone. Property worthless. People who've lived here all their lives will lose everything. Health care, pensions, the lot."

"Pretty grim picture."

"It doesn't have to be. We just need time to make things right again."

"You make it sound like *Little House on the Prairie,*" Cass said evenly. "Small town folks fighting the long arm of the EPA. But you've skipped a scene. The part where I almost get my head blown off up on the mountain."

"Granted, that was a mistake. But you *were* trespassing. The Kraniaks own the old mine now."

"Do they? C'mon, if you turned the lot of 'em upside down you wouldn't shake out enough change to buy six beers. What was the deal? The company gave 'em the land in exchange for some kind of mad-dog guard duty?"

"Something like that," Tommy conceded. "And I'll admit they may have overreacted, but dammit, you shouldn't have been up there."

"Overreacted? Tommy, they shot at me without a warning and broke into my dad's place afterwards. They tried to kill me, for God's sake."

"Don't get melodramatic on me, Cass. The Kraniaks may be a little wild, but they wouldn't kill anybody. Christ, I've known them all my life."

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"Yeah, well maybe the Kraniaks we used to know wouldn't kill anyone. But they're definitely up to it now. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"How do you mean?"

"Heavy-metal poisoning, Tommy. There was an ugly incident in Japan a few years ago. They spotted it when a lot of people started having mental problems. Brain damage. Yesterday I saw one of the Kraniak kids. Down's syndrome, I think. Coincidence? Or did your bosses forget to mention how bad the contamination was when they gave the Kraniaks the land? And what it could do to them?"

Vanderlan swallowed and looked away, avoiding Cass's eyes.

"That's what I thought," Cass said grimly, struggling to his feet. "My God, Tommy, what happened to you?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, but there's no way I can sit on this."

"Cass, don't be crazy. If you don't care about us, think about your dad. If you break this story his cottage won't be worth spit. How will you pay for his care if—"

"Dammit, he might not even need care if you hadn't covered this thing up! How many others have there been, Tommy? All those empty cottages on the lake? And the scoutmaster? Did he suddenly forget how to swim? This thing's out of control, Tommy. They tried to kill me tonight, and I don't think I was the first. You've got to get out of it. It's your only chance."

"I can't," Vanderlan said, swallowing, moving to block the doorway. "It's not just me. It's my dad and people I've known all my life. I can't let you destroy them."

Cass stumbled to the fireplace and snatched a poker. He brandished it one-handed, clutching his ribs with the other. "Tommy, I'm too busted up to tangle with you. So get out of my way, or I swear I'll spill your brains all over the floor."

Vanderlan held his ground a moment, then backed away. "Hell, go ahead," he said bitterly. "The shape you're in, you won't make it to the end of the block."

"Yes I will," Cass said, edging past him. "I have to."

But out in the car, he wasn't so sure. He didn't know anyone else in the village, couldn't risk asking for help. His best shot would be to call the state police from the pay phone at the Sunoco station.

He never made it. As he pulled into the station, he sensed a movement in the parking lot across the street and saw Harry Kran-

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iak coming for him at a dead run. Carrying a baseball bat.

Cass floored the gas pedal, gunning the Buick straight at Harry, tires howling. Kraniak leapt aside at the last moment, swinging the bat wildly, smashing the Buick's passenger window as it flew past. Cass kept the pedal to the metal, rocketing through the sleeping village at seventy plus.

In the rearview mirror he glimpsed the Kraniak's pickup slowing just enough for Harry to clamber into the back, and then they were after him.

The driver passed Harry a rifle from the gunrack in the rear window. Cass swung the Buick hard to the right, then back again. It worked at first. Harry snapped off a couple of quick shots, clean misses. But each time Cass swerved the Buick, the pickup gained a little ground, and if it got much closer all the dodging in the world wouldn't help.

And then they were in the hills, and the twists and rises in the road made dodging unnecessary. It was all Cass could manage to keep the Buick on the blacktop. But he wouldn't be able to manage it for long. Each jolt that thrust him against his seatbelt triggered a bone-crunching agony in his chest that nearly paralyzed him. He was close to his limit, and if he blacked out now, he'd be finished, one way or the other. And then he realized it didn't matter. He was finished anyway.

Christ, the one-lane bridge over Miles Creek. He'd have to slow to twenty or so to make the curve, and they'd have him. He blinked hard, trying to clear the sweat from his eyes. Think!

Two or three more miles, only a few minutes at the speed they were traveling. He tried to remember what the road ahead was like; curves, cutoffs. It was no good. It'd been too long.

All he could remember was the bridge, and the hard curve that led onto it. A mile ahead now, coming up fast.

But maybe . . . There was one chance. A slim one, but the only one he could think of. He began to slow, letting the pickup gain on him a little. Harry held his fire. No need. He knew they'd have him at the bridge.

But Cass didn't wait. As they approached the final curve he slowed to fifty and edged over to the left lane, as though he was going to try to take the bridge at speed. The pickup moved up to block him on the outside, and Cass immediately pumped his brakes. As the pickup surged alongside, Cass cramped the wheel hard right, slamming into the pickup broadside, sweeping both vehicles headfirst

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into the embankment at fifty miles an hour. He caught a split-second glimpse of Harry going airborne as the pickup hit, then the Buick's dash exploded in his face and time stopped. . . .

Dead. Had to be. Couldn't hurt this bad and . . . Wrong. Death's . . . supposed to be the end of pain. So? With a concentrated effort of will Cass managed to open his eyes. It didn't make sense. He was tilted on his side, still strapped in the car, with a pillow draped over the wheel. . . .

No, not a pillow. An airbag. The Buick's airbag had gone off. The car was totaled, its crumpled hood buried in the embankment halfway to the shattered windshield. But the bag had saved him. He was alive. For the moment.

The pickup? He swiveled his head painfully to the right. Didn't see it at first. Didn't recognize it. It was upside down on top of the embankment. Must have flipped when it struck. No sign of life, but a rear wheel was revolving lazily in the early morning light. Still turning. So he couldn't have been unconscious for long. He had to get out. But the seatbelt seemed to be jammed. . . . Couldn't manage it. Too late anyway. Someone was coming, a shadowy silhouette against the sunlight. Carrying a rifle. Harry?

No. Tommy Vanderlan.

He knelt beside the Buick. "Cass? Can you hear me?"

Cass tried to speak but nothing came for a moment. "Yeah," he said at last.

"Are you badly hurt?" Tommy asked.

"I'm not sure. But I think so. What about . . . Harry. And the other one?"

"Dead. Both of them. Harry's all smashed. . . . God, it's awful."

"And I'm next, is that it?"

"Next?" Tommy said slowly. He seemed dazed, unable to focus.

"The rifle, Tommy. You gonna shoot me?"

"I, ahm . . . Jesus, no, Cass. I found it on the road. I couldn't shoot anybody. Not even you."

"Then help me, Tommy. I can't feel anything. You've got to get me out of here."

"I . . . I don't think I should risk moving you, Cass. If you're busted up, it could kill you. I'd better get help." He straightened slowly, looking around.

"Tommy. Don't leave me here to die. Please."

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"I won't," Vanderlan said, swallowing. "I'll be back as soon as I can. With an ambulance. I promise."

"Tommy? Wait, please." But he didn't answer. He trudged slowly out of Cass's view, still carrying the rifle.

Cass heard Tommy's GTO fire up and then rumble away. It didn't seem to be moving very fast. But sound can be tricky in the hills. Cass focused on that engine with every ounce of concentration he had left, until the murmur faded to silence, and only the wind remained, gently rustling the pines. . . .

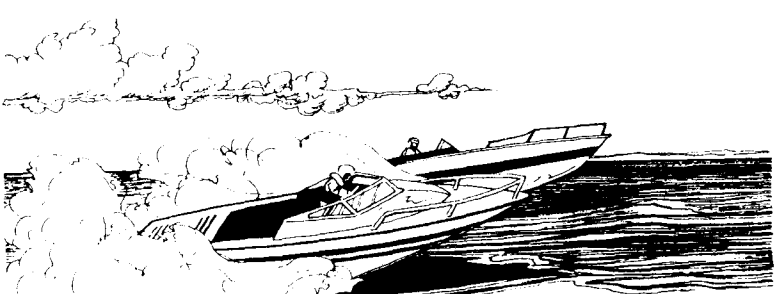
Cass blinked awake. He must've conked out for a moment. Wasn't sure how long he'd been unconscious. He was still alone. But it would take time for Tommy to get an ambulance out here.

And it would come. It would. The Tommy he'd known wouldn't just . . . leave him. He couldn't have changed that much. He'd be back. Cass was so sure of it he made himself relax. He tried to keep alert by listening for the whine of sirens, but the only sound was the hiss of the truck wheel turning slowly . . . slowly . . .

Until it became the sibilant whisper of the waves.

And he was a boy again. Walking with his father along the shore at dusk. And as the old man turned to smile at him, the last light of the dying sun struck the water just so. . . .

And the waves of Fire Lake suddenly kindled into flame.



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Bill James is the author of a series of CID police procedurals featuring detective-sleuth Colin Harpur (published in the United States by Countryman Press). The following story, his first for EQMM, *explores a long-buried crime from World War II . . .*

WAR CRIME

by BILL JAMES

You'll be thinking, this is no place for an elderly woman, day in day out, haunting a building site, gaping at mechanical diggers. I'm certainly not interested in one of the "six-bedroom prestige homes" they'll erect. I live alone now.

This was a Second World War Royal Air Force airfield at the edge of the town, abandoned years ago. Now, in 1994, they are breaking up the runways, ready for one of those "executive" estates, and as a matter of fact, I'm here to see whether a boy called Peter Milton is found under the concrete. He will be wearing a wedding ring.

I call him a boy, and this is how I still think of dear, vile Peter. He was a boy when his life ended in 1943 and I put his beautiful body in the ground. They were just constructing this airfield. I was seventeen and Peter fourteen. At the time it seemed a mighty barrier, this difference in age—woman, child. Now, of course, the gap between him and me would be nothing. Perhaps I was wrong to worry about it even then. The thought harrows me. So do many others from those damned, imperishable days.

He was not local, but evacuated here from London to escape German bombing. Although by 1943 the blitz had slackened and many evacuees went back, Peter and a few others stayed. I was working in council Welfare, my first job after leaving school. While I began as just an office girl, senior staff were scarce in the war and soon I had to help with liaison—making sure the evacuees were happy. Peter and I were bound to have a lot of personal contact. Absolutely nothing untoward about this, believe me.

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These Londoners seemed more grown up than children raised here—sharper and tougher, girls as well as boys. What you would expect: big city against small town. I was still at school myself when they first arrived just after war was declared in September 1939, and some of the girls were put in my class. They knew so much: not about schoolwork, but other topics, grown-up topics, and Peter was the same, although only ten years old then. If he and his friends met you in the street they would sometimes shout crude, shocking, terribly intimate things.

When I came to know him better, I discovered he was not really like that. He could be sensitive, he had feelings. If not, he might still be alive and I would not need to wait near this disturbed ground every day, scrutinising dirt. The workmen puzzle.

Peter disappeared near the middle of that year, 1943. At first, nobody bothered. People said he had run away, back to London. Occasionally, evacuees did that. He never arrived there, though, and eventually police here began a search. Peter and his friends used to play in sand dunes on the beach, making their dens, fighting battles, boiling crabs, and this was where police, troops, and volunteers concentrated their efforts, in case he had been buried by a fall. Finally, they dug out a place Peter had made with bits of driftwood and a sheet of corrugated iron. They did not find him, but some of his things were there: a Mickey Mouse ala m clock, army badges which he collected, and his autograph book. Very unfortunately, I had put my signature in that, and a line from a quite famous poem, "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." The poem concerns girls, really, but it had seemed right for him when I wrote it. I told the police I had no idea where he might be, and it was absolutely true, then. They asked what the poetry meant, and I replied at once that it was only to fill up the page and came from another time, indeed, another century. Again, true.

It had been one of our good days when I wrote that. Peter could be so delightful, and he could be an utterly evil swine, with true London swinishness. When we had good days, I would take him on outings, such as watching military parades to celebrate "Warships Week" or "National Savings Week" or "Tanks Week," displays meant to prop civilian morale. Sometimes we would go to the cinema, or to historical places like the cottages used by political agitators called Chartists for meetings last century, or we might gather wildflowers or blackberries in the country. This was simply part of my work and perfectly normal, believe me. You see, it was partly

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because we gathered wildflowers together that I wrote what I did.

His mother sent him the book from London for his fourteenth birthday and he said I must be the first to sign, because I mattered most. This was silly, but very sweet. That's what I meant—he could be really considerate. On these nice days he would talk to me as if I were his girlfriend, and he would try to use his hands and so on in the pictures or when we were blackberrying. Naturally, I had to stop that. He was too young. This is what I meant before: they were so grown up, these London kids. I don't know what went on between him and some evacuee girls, especially one called Joy. That used to make me horribly miserable and angry, though I never let him see I cared. It would not have been proper. In some ways, Peter was a right little shit. (That kind of language I would not have used then, of course. Women and girls didn't. But this is 1994 and things have changed, for better or worse I don't know. In any case, I and the rest of us in the town learned quite a bit from those evacuees, including some coarseness, I'm afraid.) There were bound to be times when I felt overwhelming hate for Peter, weren't there? At those moments it was as if I ceased to be myself and an appalling rage took over. It would always fade, but not always in time.

When I wrote that poetry in his book, we were behind the Chartist cottages on an afternoon out there, and he wanted to kiss me, I mean, really kiss me, on the mouth, bodies close, but I would not allow that either. I could not. I told him, I was like a sister or his schoolteacher. He replied that the poetry said something different—he could be so clever, that one—but I told him it was only poetry, from another, distant time. We had a laugh and he did not get at all vicious, not that day.

Then, just a week afterwards, he somehow found out about an entirely separate matter, and suddenly he changed. Peter could be fond, he could be a ripe peril. You see, I had kept quiet about certain new aspects of my life: I was sure it would be exceptionally unwise to tell him I needed somebody more my own age. He would refuse to understand. So, in the street, he stood right in front of me and said at the top of his squeaky, wild voice, "Some dirty ice-a-da-creamo Wop's sticking it up you, is he?"

I still feel ill when I recall those savage words. It was how they talked, the Londoners, even after years with us. And it was how they thought—vulgarity, aggression. You see, this was his sickening, glorious jealousy, which would lead to such a horrible end. I try never to think of it now, but the memories often force their way

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back. He had no damn rights over me. I was older, a woman, really. Good God, friends of my age were married and starting families.

The evacuees were not our only visitors at that time. Just outside the town stood a camp for Italian prisoners of war, who used to help the farmers. This was what Peter meant when he said "Wop." To be fair, everybody called Italians that then, and said all they could do was sell ice cream. These were the enemy, of course, like Jerries and Japs. But most of the Italians seemed gentle, not real soldiers. By this time, Italy was almost out of the war anyway. The camp had very little security, and prisoners worked unguarded on the farms. This was how I met Carlo.

It happened first when I went gathering wildflowers by myself one day on my bike. Peter should have come but failed to turn up, so it was absolutely his own filthy fault. I felt sure he was with one of the girl evacuees: Joy, I should think, the easy, scheming cow, giving joy to every boy she fancied, which meant most—I don't exaggerate. That really hurt me, but I decided not to look for him. Carlo was cutting a farm hedge near the patch of wildflowers. He could speak some English and was nice and funny and a bit dreamy, but not as beautiful as Peter. Carlo had quite a nose. The thing about Peter was his lovely long, soft, dark hair and brown eyes that could be so wonderfully warm. I was younger than Carlo, though only a few years, and I felt quite happy with him. He could often sneak out, and I began to go to see him, especially on Sunday afternoons, and he would tell me about Italy. He came from a place called Bolzano and said he had been a boot repairer there, but was studying while a prisoner and might become a teacher or even a headmaster.

One day he said we would marry after the war, and if they sent him away to another camp or back to Italy, he would come and find me the moment he could. I was not sure, but later he gave me a gold ring that used to belong to his mother, who was dead. Naturally, I was careful and wore it only when I saw him. Usually, I kept it hidden on a cord around my neck. I knew people would think it bad for a girl to be with an Italian prisoner, a kind of betrayal of our troops and Mr. Churchill, and I never showed the ring or told anyone about Carlo. How Peter discovered his existence, I still don't know. He had this stinking London slyness, those lovely, stinking, miss-nothing brown eyes.

I think he began to watch me secretly. One Sunday afternoon, I was in some woods with Carlo, when he rolled away suddenly and sat up because he had heard a noise. Quickly, we began to dress.

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Then, out from the trees rushed Peter and four other boys, all of them London friends of his. They had hammers and iron bars and began to beat Carlo before he could get to his feet and defend himself.

They struck him on the head and face and lower, until he was unconscious. Peter hit him again and again, using some of that gross London language: "See what we do to Wops who stick it up our girls? And on a Sunday, too. He's not kitted, I see. Are you? You'll be hatching a little Musso bastard—thought of that? And where d'you get that stinking ring?" I did not answer but was so upset and enraged that I told Peter I never wanted to speak to him again. He laughed and said I would soon come crawling, because I needed him so badly. But I meant it. That anger stayed with me quite a while, and I gave notice and left Welfare so I would not have to meet him.

That Sunday of the incident, I hurried to the camp and told Carlo's friends and they came to carry him back. He was unconscious. When I went on Monday to find out how he was, a prisoner said Carlo died from head wounds the previous evening, without coming round. I never discovered if they even brought a doctor. During the war, it was another time, and Carlo was only a prisoner. This was murder, of course, a horrible crime, but not one to interest the police much then. Troops killed Italians all the time in battle and nobody would worry much about another one dead. And, in any case, Carlo should not have been out of the camp. I knew the British commandant would want to keep it all quiet, or he might be in trouble. Probably he reported the death as due to a camp fight. And witnesses? I felt so sad but could never have publicly said the truth. People would think I was foully cheap to be like that with an Italian in the open air on what they termed the Sabbath. I never read anything of the killing in the local press, nor even heard of a funeral.

Two months later, Peter disappeared. I had seen him lurking near my parents' house, where I was living then, but avoided him by using back lanes. For a few days after the den was found, police and soldiers dug out more sand hills. They discovered nothing else. At the end, people said he must have gone swimming alone and drowned. I knew it was not true. Like all the London children, he hated the sea. I used to take him to the beach sometimes, but although he put his swimming trunks on, he never went near the water. He had a quite tall, slim body, yet not weak-looking. In any case, it was nearly winter when he disappeared and the sea would be too cold.

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As a matter of fact, detectives came to see me four times about the autograph book, and kept on and on with their questions, but I still said the piece of poetry meant nothing special. And, perhaps, really, it didn't in the end. I wouldn't let it, couldn't let it. But, naturally, all their damn nosiness made me think back to that splendid day when we went to the Chartist cottages, and on a Sunday afternoon, one week after the search for Peter was finally abandoned, I cycled there. What I needed then was something to bring comfort through joyous memories of him. In winter the cottages would not be open to visitors, but that did not matter.

Arriving, I went around the back where I had written in the autograph book. That quotation had just come to me out of nowhere, and despite all the suspicion from police, I never regretted it. There was little I could regret in my contacts with Peter. What I regretted above all, and still grieve over, was the way I had broken those contacts, the way I had turned away from him in my fury after the serious banging he gave Carlo.

For a few moments, recollections of that happy day with the autograph book did rush back when I saw the cottages again. I felt pleased I had come. Sometimes a special location can create that sort of marvellous thrill, though it's all rubbish, of course: a place is only a place. Then, while I was still rejoicing at my decision, I found a window at the rear had been broken. That troubled me, but I did not know why. After a moment, I put my hand through and unfastened the catch. For a couple of minutes, I remained outside, no longer feeling joyful, yet knowing I must enter. Peter and I had gone inside last time, and this wish now was part of that deep urge to relive all the previous visit. I climbed in.

There was a strange smell, which I did not remember from before. The window led into a little larder, with dim-wit models of a nineteenth-century cabbage and loaf on the shelf, to show that in those days, too, people used to eat, and it was when I opened the door from this larder into the single downstairs room that I saw Peter.

I can think about this now and stay calm, but for years after that day, I was unable to speak of it. Thank God there was no call to speak of it. In fact, everything demanded silence. Some agonies are private.

To make visitors think they were having a real trip back in time, the council had kept these cottages as they were in history, and Peter Milton had hanged himself by the neck with rope fixed on a ceiling hook, once used for bacon sides too big for the larder. These

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hooks had to be strong because you did not want a great meat slab smashing down on one of the plentiful Victorian kiddies in its crib. There were some old chairs and other ancient furniture in the cottages and he had stood on a chair and kicked it away. It lay on its side now against the wall. He had brought the rope here, sure of what he intended. And he must have walked all that distance: I saw no bike outside. It all showed real determination, a real plan, and raw, unspeakable torment.

Of course, he had been there quite a long time. For a while I did not know what to do and thought of climbing back out of the window and cycling away. I could achieve nothing here, put nothing right. A section of my mind said this was nobody I knew, not now—this was nobody at all, not any longer: in the past, yes, someone sparkling and fine, with, admittedly, certain duff character aspects, but those were part of his liveliness, even if they meant someone else's harsh death. Now, no character at all.

And then I decided I could not treat Peter like that: leave him dangling on a pig hook, perhaps until the holiday season started again with all its sunshine and chattering folk on happy outings. I owed him more. This boy had killed for me. In many ways that was monstrous, of course, but it seemed also rather binding, in its way. Looking at him dead, I had to think even more than that: he had killed twice for me, for me alone. I brought back the chair he had used himself and, standing on it, tried to push the knot in the rope up and over the point of the hook so he would fall. When he was down I might be able to manage something. But I could not move that knot. This was the only way I could see to get him free. Free? How could he be free? But I had no other word. Because of tautness, it was impossible to undo the knot. He had made an excellent job of that. I thought of him reaching up and taking care over it, jerking down a few times with his hand to test, so he knew there would be no mistake when it got his jolting though boyish weight.

I was working with my fingers above my head, which made things very difficult, and his body, spinning slowly now and then, pulled down on the rope so it resisted all my pushing up. I paused. Of course, I should have realised that a broken window meant bits of glass, and I could have found one and sawed the rope. My brain was not doing very well, though, that day. It was as if I felt I had to release him by my own strength and effort, and cutting the rope did not come into it, could not. This was something I needed to do for Peter, and it had to be difficult, a hard and worthwhile task for a

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dear, beloved crony. Standing on the chair, I had my face and head more or less level with his, and I knew that in a moment I would have to put my arms around his middle and try to lift him, easing the load off the rope while I attempted again to free him. In a grim way it was like the closeness of lovers, that merging into each other. How it always was with Peter and me: like lovers, only like.

If it were not for his clothes, he would have been difficult to recognise, what with the time he had been there and the quite noticeable disturbances throughout him that being hanged caused. I remember feeling war had taken me too fast into the adult world of ugliness and wise despair.

Bending my legs a little, I took hold of Peter around his waist, then tried to lift him and get the cruel tension off the rope. Peter's frame did not feel like a body, of course—so unyielding after the time he had been there. No, he could not be mistaken for a lover.

I managed to get a tiny bit of slack into the rope. Then, though, I had to free one hand, reach high again, and strive to push the knot up and over the hook point. This meant that I would have to keep Peter's weight off by clutching him with one arm only. I rested there for a few seconds, still pressing him to me with both arms—a kind of afflicted, unwholesome, very late farewell hug—then increased the pressure with my right arm and quickly raised my left hand to try to slide the knot up.

It did not work at once. I was gasping and my legs shook. Of course, I was not in the best condition for such a struggle and I feared I would have to release him before I had finished, or that I would topple from the chair. I needed help, and help was the last thing I wanted. Then, somehow, the knot did get over the hook's tip and the rope's end glanced against my shoulder as it tumbled. I think I laughed aloud at this little triumph. People must have giggled and had pleasure in this cottage when it was lived in, but probably nobody ever giggled in here before over getting a revered corpse unhung. I lowered Peter to the ground with as much control as I could—not very much. He hit the boards with two sharp, hard sounds. At first he landed on his feet and the noise came from his shoes. He actually stood upright briefly and for that second I could almost see him as he used to be, a cheerful, war-torn kid in a paisley pullover. His face was away from me then, so I did not have to look at the most telling aspects, and his shoulders and back of the neck and head could have been, just could have been, those of a living person.

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Then, though, he tumbled to the side and struck the floor with a hard, heavy rap, the rope trailing from him like the lead of a breakaway dog. I stepped down from the chair and went to him. Methodically, I searched his clothes. That seemed immensely necessary. There was not much, but in the pocket of his trousers I found a note in a folded envelope addressed to me with big capital letters, so there would be no mistake. It also said PRIVATE on the envelope in even bigger letters, which was thoughtful, but would have failed to keep other eyes out if I personally had not had the timeliness to find him. The note said: "There will be no rosebuds for me to gather. You don't even talk to me any longer. Why should I wait?"

About this I had a cry, though nothing too long or too loud. Lately, I had learned ways to keep things in check. He was announcing, was he, that his life meant nothing if it did not include me, and I had shut him out through anger? He had been a child, but with the thoughts and hopes of a man.

Obviously, I burned that letter as soon as I reached home. It would be a memento of him now, but not at all the kind I want. This was a brutal accusation, and too bloody fair. I went to my room and then sneaked out of the house so my mother would not notice. I had found some old potato sacks in our shed, and I took them in my saddlebag when I cycled back to the cottages. With these sacks I made what I think could be regarded as a duly respectful covering and, wrapping Peter in it, set out to drag him to where the airfield was under construction. This seemed an awful thing to do with someone who had been so comely, bumping and tugging him over rough ground. It took hours, mostly across fields. Now and then I had to pause with him under a hedge, through fatigue or because I heard people near. The sacks still smelled of potatoes. Fortunately, the blackout was in force then, and even when we came near houses light did not fall on us. No question, we were an unusual couple.

Men had left tools where they were constructing runways and I dug a small grave and carefully eased him in. I took the sacking off him first and burned that later at home, like the letter and the envelope. I knew it would be wrong to include such workaday stuff in his final spot. Before I covered his body with soil, I took the ring off the cord around my neck and put it on his marriage finger. That seemed absolutely right, and anyone would have done the same. I placed him face down. Always we think of people buried looking up, like seeking the light. I suppose it is a religious thing—the eyes sightless, yet directed towards salvation, heaven, God. I could not

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bear to think of the dirt falling in around his eyes and cheeks and nose, though. A week later they slapped on the concrete, thick enough for loaded bombers.

There are still these days when I cannot resist coming here, but I've no real hope now of seeing what's left of Peter or the ring again, though I will attend once or twice more while the machines are working near that notable area. You can see that the ring would have been a sweet reminder of both Peter and Carlo, not that I could care less about Carlo, with his dreary looks and endless, greasy talk about Italy, or Wopland as we used to call it in the war. He was going back to his drab work as a boot repairer, and all that business about making it to headmaster was sky pie. Thank God he never could come looking for me after the war. It is Peter I think of all the time, and his brilliant, ownership anger on finding us undoubtedly conjoint in the woods, his marvellous eyes so injured and agleam.

Fortunately, even without the ring I have something special and, yes, living, to remember him by. I am sure, unswervingly sure, that my son was conceived that day Peter killed the father. These are rare circumstances, I should think. I called my son Paolo, which I felt to be a happy combination of the two names, Peter and Carlo. I was quite lucky not to lose him through the contortions with Peter's corpse. By the time Paolo was born in 1944, Britain and Italy were at peace, so local folk would not be too bothered about an Italian name. I decided, sod what they thought, anyway. I don't consider it at all disrespectful to the dead to say Paolo grew up a lot better looking than his dad and luckily got my nose.

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Though I once astonished myself on a flight home from Montreal by getting through without a dictionary the very simple French of *Le Cadavre Regardait la Télé,* one of Pierre Saurel's French-Canadian novels about Le Manchot, I am essentially a monolingual reader. Thus, I sometimes wonder wistfully how much good crime fiction published in other languages never gets translated into English. Though a number of French writers, including Emile Gaboriau, Maurice Leblanc, and Gaston Leroux, enjoyed prominence in translation early in the genre's development, their influence in the English-reading world has decreased in the years since. A few European writers, most notably the Belgian Georges Simenon, the Swedish team of Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, and the Italian bestseller Umberto Eco, have enjoyed major success, but most have been translated sporadically or not at all. Recent years have seen a smattering of translations from the Japanese but only a very small part of that prime mystery market's output. Among the most widely translated foreign writers of recent years has been the Mexican novelist Paco Ignacio Taibo. Two Dutch mystery writers—Robert van Gulik and Janwillem van de Wetering—have done well in the British and American markets, but both did most of their writing in English.

All of which brings us to another excellent Dutch writer, whose best-known book has finally achieved English-language publication, probably owing at least in part to its being the basis for two film versions.

**** Tim Krabbé: *The Vanishing,* translated from the Dutch by Clare Nicolas White, Random House, $15. The story opens with a situation out of Cornell Woolrich: Rex Hofman and girlfriend Saskia Ehlvest, travelling across France, stop at a gas station. Saskia goes into the building, leaving Rex to wait in the parking lot, and never returns. For years, Rex is obsessed with finding out what happened to her. The reader learns the truth in a parallel story; then the author brings both parts together in a terrifying climax. This is a very short novel, under a hundred pages with the white space removed, written and constructed (and, one must assume, translated) with consummate skill. It was first published in Dutch in 1984. According to the copyright page, a grant from the Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature made its publication possible.

*** John Lutz: *Thicker Than Blood,* St. Martin's, $19.95. St. Louis's sad-sack private eye Nudger, still popping antacids and avoiding Danny's Dunker Delites (while loading up on the sly on a competitor's Muncha-

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Bunches), is asked to look into a supposed securities fraud and winds up entwined in the affairs of a dysfunctional family a la Ross Macdonald while taking a stockmarket flyer on dubious inside information picked up during his investigation. The plot is more complex than usual, and many of the events are very dark and very serious, but as usual the main attractions are the likable central character, the Lutzean humor, and one of the most admirable prose styles in the mystery field. (Though Nudger has been essentially a one-name detective for years, his long-discarded first name, Alo, still turns up on the book jacket.)

*** Grif Stockley: *Religious Conviction,* Simon and Schuster, $21. Arkansas lawyer Gideon Page is surprised when the area's top litigator Chet Bracken asks him to assist in the defense of Leigh Wallace, daughter of charismatic preacher Shane Norman, accused of murdering her husband. Gideon is dismayed to find his girlfriend Rainey and teenage daughter Sarah coming under the thrall of Norman's Christian Life church. This is not as good a book as it starts out to be—detection is notably lacking and the whodunit surprise is easily anticipated—but the relationship of Gideon and Sarah remains involving, and the ethical and religious dilemmas are well handled.

*** Donald MacKenzie: *Loose Cannon,* St. Martin's, $17.95. Philip Page, extradited from the United States to Great Britain on charges of fraud in the sale of a defense company years before, is fortunate to secure the help of John Raven, maverick ex-cop who lives in a houseboat on the Thames. MacKenzie, whose autobiography *Occupation: Thief* (1955) was followed by his first novel the following year, is the kind of solid veteran easy to overlook in today's crowded mystery market. He has a clean, smoothly professional style reminiscent of Victor Canning, along with a knack for character and pace.

** Karen Kijewski: *Wild Cat,* Doubleday, $19.95. Sacramento sleuth-for-hire Kat Colorado, in her fifth book-length adventure, takes on the case of menaced whistleblower Amanda Hudson, whose employer Louden Industries has been making *sub rosa* out-of-court settlements to avoid public disclosure of the failures of its defect-prone artificial heart valves. Kijewski falls far short in the inevitable comparisons with Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky. Her narrative techniques and some of her characters are too stereotypical, and her constant use of sentence fragments and one-sentence paragraphs for redundant emphasis, a technique reminiscent of such long-time private eye writers as Henry Kane and Michael Avallone, can be irritating. Still, the author's undoubted storytelling gift and the straight-ahead simplicity of the plot and characters are the sort of combination that sometimes makes bestsellers, so the publisher's hard promotional push may be justified.

John Mortimer has selected seven cases from previous volumes and written an informative introduction for *The Best of Rumpole* (Viking, $21). Rumpole of the Bailey, that

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ageing and courageous junior barrister, is, of course, a favorite of both P.B.S. watchers and *EQMM* readers. For a new edition of one of the best early cases of EQ himself, with a reproduction of the original jacket on the cover, pick up Ellery Queen's *The Siamese Twin Mystery* (Penzler, $6.95), a vintage 1933 entry from Otto Penzler's Classic American Mystery Library. Revived in the same series is S.S. Van Dine's final Philo Vance novel *The Winter Murder Case* ($6.95), posthumously published in 1939 and out of print for many years. Penzler kicks off his Sherlock Holmes Library with Vincent Starrett's landmark 1933 study, *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, and another pioneering study from 1932, T.S. Blakeney's *Sherlock Holmes: Fact or Fiction?* ($7.95 each).

Only the most major of writers get their books reprinted in hardcover. Among those enjoying that rare privilege, all deservedly, are John Grisham's outstanding (but not bestselling at the time) 1989 debut, *A Time To Kill* (Doubleday, $23.50), which unfortunately lacks the interesting introduction found in the paperback edition (Island, $6.99); Jonathan Kellerman's 1986 Alex Delaware novel, *Blood Knot* (Dark Harvest, P.O. Box 941, Arlington Heights, IL 60006; $21.95), with an introduction by Dean Koontz; and a 1977 Matt Scudder novel by Lawrence Block, previously only published in paperback, *Time to Murder and Create* (Dark Harvest, $21.95), with an introduction by Kellerman.

A prolific fan reviewer has come up with a valuable reference for his first book. Gary Warren Niebuhr's *A Reader's Guide to the Private Eye Novel* (G.K. Hall, $45) annotates and indexes more than a thousand books by ninety authors of private eye fiction, ranging from major names like Hammett, Chandler, and Spillane; prolific practitioners like Brett Halliday, Thomas B. Dewey, and William Campbell Gault; and contemporaries like Sue Grafton, Robert B. Parker, Sara Paretsky, Marcia Muller, and Bill Pronzini.

Niebuhr is among the columnists for an outstanding new review periodical, *Deadly Pleasures: A Mystery Newsletter*, published quarterly by George Easter (Box 839-DP, Farmington, UT 84025-0839; $12 per year). A partial list of contributors to the handsome, professionally-produced 40-page second issue, summer 1993, should be advertisement enough for the serious fan: Don Sandstrom, Marvin Lachman, Sue Feder, Steve Lewis, Maryell Cleary, William F. Deeck, and former *EQMM* juror Allen J. Hubin.

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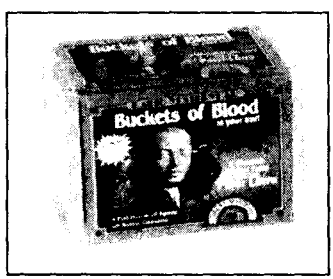

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AN EARLY MORNING MADNESS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Like most everyone else in the spring of 1889, Ben Snow had heard about the opening of a portion of the Indian Territory to white settlers. After four years of negotiations, the Creek and Seminole tribes had finally agreed to the offering of unoccupied tracts for towns and farms. Ben had been doing some fencing for a Texas rancher on the twenty-second of April, the day a gunshot in the air had signaled the beginning of a land rush by nearly fifty thousand people aiming to stake their claims on the most suitable property. There was money to be made in the former Indian Territory, everyone said, so five days later Ben quit his fencing job and headed north for his share.

The plan was that by the following year, as more tracts were opened for settlement, the area would become known as the Oklahoma Territory, separate and distinct from the remaining Indian Territory. Someday in the future, perhaps both territories would merge into an actual state, but for now settlement and growth were the important things.

Riding his horse Oats into the tent city at Guthrie in the central part of the territory, Ben was amazed at the progress that had been made in less than a week's time. Hundreds of white tents stretched

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as far as the eye could see. Some looked big enough only for a single family, while others seemed designed to house business enterprises. Crude streets had been fenced off through the lines of tents, and on the first one he came to he saw a large tent with letters proclaiming: August Thurston, Attorney at Law, Land Attorney. It seemed as good a place to start as any.

Ben tied Oats to the fence railing and went into the tent. The white canvas allowed a good deal of daylight to filter through, and it was augmented by a lantern that hung from one of the tent poles. A young woman whom Ben guessed to be a law clerk was helping people fill out forms at a long folding table, while a middle-aged man sat at a makeshift desk talking with a young couple. He was just finishing with them, sending them on their way with a smile, and since the other dozen or so people were still bent over their forms, Ben Snow went right to the desk and introduced himself.

"People ahead of you, Mr. Snow," August Thurston pointed out. He was a well-built man of about forty, wearing a fancy vest over a white shirt with elastic garters on the sleeves.

"I don't want legal advice. I'm looking for a job."

"Do you have a hammer? There's plenty of need for carpenters here." They could hear the steady banging as a frame building was going up next door.

Ben shifted his gunbelt slightly. "That's not the sort of work I do."

"Tough young fella, huh?" He bit off the end of a cigar and lit it. "Well, we've had fifty saloons open in Guthrie in the past five days. I guess one of them would have a job for a bouncer."

"I was thinking you might have some work for me," Ben told him. "I know land, I've worked on ranches. Right now you're probably having a peck of trouble with claim jumpers."

"We'll have more before we're finished sorting through deeds. I'm not the only land attorney working on this. Jessica and I got here two days before the rush and we've been busy day and night ever since."

The young woman named Jessica chose that moment to come over to Thurston with a problem. "This man says he staked his claim to a homestead out near Buffalo Creek and now there's a Negro claiming the property."

"Is the Negro there now?"

Jessica nodded. She was in her twenties, wearing boots and jeans and a shirt, with a fresh-faced look he associated with Easterners not long in the West. "He's sitting on a rock with a big double-

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barreled shotgun across his lap. He threatened to blow our client's head off."

August Thurston glanced across to the long table where a young cowpoke sat twiddling a pencil. Ben wondered if he could really write more than his name. "Do you want to ride out there with him?" the lawyer asked Jessica.

"Sure, why not?"

"I've just hired Mr. Snow here to help us with some chores for the next week or so. He can accompany the two of you."

She turned and gave Ben a smile. "Jessica Shaw. Pleased to meet you."

"Ben Snow. The pleasure's all mine."

"See, August—a real gentleman at last! The first I've met in Guthrie!" She told their client of the plan and then came back to Thurston. "What about the people who are waiting?"

The lawyer puffed on his cigar. "I'll see the ones who've already completed their forms. Tell the rest they'll have to return tomorrow." He said a few words to Ben about his pay and Ben didn't argue. He'd wanted a job and he'd found one.

Jessica Shaw introduced him to the client, the nervous young cowpoke. His name was Tex Perkins but it turned out he wasn't from Texas. He'd been born in Little Rock, Arkansas, and a childhood longing for the West had prompted the other kids to call him Tex. Though he wore a gun at his side, Ben wondered if he would ever draw it. Certainly he hadn't drawn it against the Negro claim jumper.

"Did he threaten to shoot you?" Ben asked the man, who seemed even younger than he was.

"Well, he was waving this shotgun. I wasn't taking any chances."

"What about the claim? Wasn't your marker on it?"

"He says not. He says he bought the land from a syndicate that had its marker on it."

Jessica Shaw snorted. "A syndicate, in the first week of the land rush! Some people will stop at nothing."

"What sort of syndicate is this?" Ben asked her.

"A gang of outlaws is what it is! They just plain steal several plots of land and resell them. The real owners are defrauded and if they decide to fight they're usually killed."

"We'll see about that," Ben told her. "Let's ride out there and take a look."

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There was activity all over the newborn town as the three of them rode out. Wagons and horses blocked the streets while supplies were purchased and loaded. The general hubbub gradually subsided as they rode farther from the center of Guthrie, but the traffic of horses and wagons seemed just as steady. Most of the riders were men, but occasionally Ben would spot a woman in one of the wagons, riding out with a supply of wood for the homestead her husband was building, or enough food to last them till the next trip to town. Seeing them, watching these early signs of spirited progress, Ben knew the Oklahoma Territory was going to make it, knew that with people like this it would someday be a state.

"How far out is it?" he asked Tex Perkins.

"About five miles from town, along a creek. It's a wonderful spot, and it's mine. I won't give it up without a fight."

"What did this man tell you?" Jessica asked, easily keeping up with them on her chestnut roan.

"Said he'd bought the claim fair and square from a white man who staked it the first day."

"Even if that's true, he should have had a lawyer," she said. Glancing over at Ben, she added, "I hope you know how to use that six-gun."

"I know."

Presently they came upon the creek and followed it for another mile until Perkins indicated a plot of land with a sweep of his arm. Standing by the claim stake with a shotgun cradled in his arm was one of the blackest men Ben had ever seen. As they approached he shifted the weapon and called out, "I want you to know you're trespassin' on my claim."

It was Jessica Shaw who answered him, before her client had a chance to speak. "We only want to talk, to settle this problem. Please put down the shotgun."

It didn't budge but they kept riding forward. Finally, when they were only twenty feet away, he pointed the shotgun at the ground in an apparent gesture of compromise. "I got nothing to say to you," he told them. "Especially not him—he wants to steal my land!"

"I'm Jessica Shaw, representing the lawyer August Thurston. Could you tell me your name?" She'd reined in her horse and was dismounting as she spoke. Ben and the client did the same.

"Name's Cole Jefferson," the black man said.

Perkins spoke for the first time. "Get off my claim, Cole Jefferson, or you're a dead man."

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"This can be handled legally," Jessica said quickly, but Ben was beginning to wonder if it could be. In these first days there might be hundreds of claim-jumping disputes like this, with little or no law enforcement to deal with them.

He decided the best thing to do was keep everyone talking. "Suppose we take it from the beginning. What was the date and time that you staked your claim, Perkins?"

"Monday, April twenty-second, at about one-thirty in the afternoon. The claim stake was right where he's standing."

Jefferson stepped aside. "It's still here, with my claim on it. I bought the land from the man who staked it last Monday, and it wasn't him!" As if to emphasize the point, the barrel of the shotgun moved up a few inches. Ben's hand moved fractionally toward his own weapon.

"Who was this man?" Jessica asked, making notes of the conversation in a ledger she'd taken from her saddlebag.

"Grantland. Cyrus Grantland. I wasn't the only one who bought land from him. I paid him in gold."

"Where'd a black bugger like you get gold?" Tex Perkins asked, itching for a fight. "Steal it?"

The Negro moved, and Ben went for his gun. But Cole dropped the shotgun before hurling himself at Perkins, and the two of them hit the ground in a heap. Ben and Jessica Shaw moved closer, trying to pull them apart while avoiding the tumble of booted feet.

Finally Ben threw himself on the two of them, parting them with his own body as Jessica yanked on her client's wrist. "He insulted me!" Cole Jefferson growled. "I want an apology."

Perkins struggled to his feet, still in Ben's grasp. "You want an apology?" he snarled in a voice that surprised Ben with its viciousness. Spitting at the ground, he issued a challenge. "Meet me out here at dawn tomorrow with your shotgun. We'll see who's the better man, and who gets this land!"

They managed to pull Perkins away, and all during their ride back to town Jessica Shaw lectured him on the importance of dealing with these matters in a court of law. Perkins scoffed at the idea. "What court is there in Guthrie?" he wanted to know.

"There'll be one," she assured him. "If you go out there with a shotgun tomorrow morning you'll have to answer to it—if you're not six feet under the ground."

Back in the town of tents and half-finished wooden buildings, would-be clients still milled around August Thurston's makeshift

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office. Thurston himself was sending the last of them away when they rode up, and he listened to Jessica's account with increasing distaste. "What about it, Snow?" he asked at last. "What am I paying you for?"

"The man didn't try to use his gun," Ben answered. "Was I supposed to shoot him for starting a wrestling match?"

"I don't need anyone to protect me," Perkins insisted. "I'll duel him for the land, and I'll win—with shotguns or any other weapon he wants!"

August Thurston removed his eyeglasses and peered at the young man. "Dueling is forbidden by law in virtually every state of the Union."

"This isn't a state, not yet," he reminded the lawyer. "It's not even an organized territory. I'll be out there at dawn to reclaim my property. If lawyers aren't going to help me, I'll help myself."

He walked briskly out of the tent, leaving Thurston looking as if his anger might erupt at any moment. "If Perkins and that Negro settle their dispute with a shotgun duel, everyone else will be doing the same thing! No one will need lawyers."

"I doubt—" Jessica began, but her employer cut her off.

"Stop that duel! I don't care how you do it, but it must be stopped. Do you both hear me?"

"The only way I know to stop it," Ben told him, "is to kidnap or kill one of the participants."

"Do what you have to."

There were indeed fifty saloons in Guthrie, and Jessica showed Ben every one of them before they stopped for a drink at one of the few located in a finished wooden building. Most of the others were mere tent shows where a long board on a couple of barrels was the closest thing to a traditional bar. At least at this one, Rango's Territorial Saloon, there were a few chairs and tables, and no one leered more than once at the presence of a young woman.

"How about a beer?" she asked Ben.

"That would taste good."

She signaled the bartender and after a moment he delivered two mugs of dark brew to their table. "Ben Snow, this is Rango Blaine, the proprietor of Guthrie's first and best saloon."

They shook hands and the red-bearded Rango peered at Ben. "Heard about a fella by that name, down in Texas. Folks thought he was Billy the Kid."

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Ben shook his head. "Billy's long dead."

"Glad to hear it."

When he'd returned to the bar Jessica asked, "Do you get that often?"

"About Billy the Kid? Occasionally. Less now than at first, when the news of Billy's death hadn't gotten around."

"You know that's why Thurston hired you. He heard you were fast with a gun, Billy the Kid or the next best thing to him."

"I'm not surprised. I've had to kill a few men in my time."

She peered into his face as if trying to read some secret there. "How old are you, Ben?"

"My folks always said I was born in sixty-one, but if I'm Billy I was born in fifty-nine. Sometimes I get mixed up myself. Anyway, I'm either twenty-eight or thirty."

She smiled. "Same age as me, either twenty-eight or thirty." After another sip of beer she asked, "Are you going to kill Cole Jefferson?"

"Why should I do that?"

"Because August Thurston wants you to. He won't say it in so many words, but you heard what he did say. The duel would simply lead to more duels. It would mean a breakdown of law and order."

"There's a way to prevent or at least nullify the duel without killing anyone."

"What would that be?"

"If we act as their seconds and substitute shotgun shells with most of the powder removed. The pellets might cause surface wounds but they wouldn't kill anyone, and it just might bring them both to their senses."

She thought about it and nodded. "It makes sense, if they'll accept us as seconds. What if they bring their own?"

"I doubt if they're familiar with the code of dueling. Jefferson is probably staying out there all night and Tex Perkins will ride out before dawn. We'll show up and pretend to take charge."

"It might work," she agreed. "What about the shotgun shells?"

"We'll buy a box for Jefferson's gun, but we need to know what make of weapon Perkins will use."

"Couldn't we supply the weapons, too?" Jessica suggested. "Then we'll be sure."

"At least we could insist that Perkins use the same make of shotgun as Jefferson. Let's go see him and talk about it."

She had a note of where he was staying, at a big tent that had been set up for temporary housing. They found him easily enough,

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filling a jug with drinking water from a large barrel on the back of a wagon. The water had been brought from the nearby Cimarron River, and a line of settlers stood behind Perkins waiting their turn.

"Did Thurston send you?" Perkins asked, addressing Jessica and ignoring Ben.

"He doesn't know I'm here. We want to talk about tomorrow."

"You won't change my mind. The duel is on!"

"You'll need seconds," Ben told him.

Perkins looked blank. "What?"

Ben explained it all to him, including the part about the identical weapons. "You can choose whichever of us you want for a second."

"I'll take her," he said without hesitation.

"Then I'll offer to be Jefferson's second, if he wants me. Now what about the shotgun?"

"He uses a double-barrel Winchester. I borrowed one just like it from Rango Blaine, the barkeep."

"I'd better have a look at it," Jessica said.

Ben nodded. "Check the firing pins. Make sure they're in good working order."

He let her go off alone with the client, since she was supposed to be his second in the duel. When she returned, satisfied the weapon was in good working order, it was already beginning to grow dark. "We'd better turn in early," she suggested. "I'll see you out there at dawn."

He watched her go off to one of the tents where single women were being housed together. There weren't many of them, only a few barmaids, prostitutes, and professionals like Jessica who'd come early to beat the crowd to the good jobs. He'd have to ask her sometime how she'd managed to link up with August Thurston.

For himself, Ben had no intention of retiring quite yet. He was remembering a name that Cole Jefferson had mentioned—Cyrus Grantland, the man who'd sold him that plot of land. Him and others. Maybe if he found Grantland he could still forestall the morning duel.

But he soon discovered that the man was more elusive than he'd thought. Starting at Rango's Saloon, he learned that Grantland was a land speculator from back East. One of the bar's customers had bought a piece of property from him, and the deed had been recorded without difficulty.

"Has Grantland been around here?" Ben asked Rango Blaine.

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The barkeep, ringing up a final sale on the cash register before turning the job over to his assistant, thought about it and answered, "I seen him around a few times this week. Tall man, wears a leather jacket and a string tie."

"Armed?"

"Most men carry guns around Guthrie. I didn't see one, but he might wear it under his coat."

"Thanks, Rango."

Ben tried a half-dozen other bars without notable success. A few people knew Cyrus Grantland, but no one could say where he was staying or when he might appear again. "Gone to Texas," one man said, and it might have been true.

Near midnight, as the less popular saloons began to shut their doors and lock up their bottles, Ben spotted a tall man in a leather jacket leaving one of them and making his way across the dusty street toward a small tent. He hurried to catch up to the man. "Mr. Grantland? Just a moment, please!"

The man whirled in a crouch, drawing his revolver. Only the sight of Ben's empty hands kept him from firing. "What do you want?"

"A word with you. I understand you sell plots of land."

"Got nothing at the moment." He'd straightened up to face Ben, revealing a nasty face with a mouth puckered at one end as if from a faded scar. "Shouldn't sneak up on folks like that. Get yourself killed someday." He slipped the gun back under his coat.

"You sold a plot out along the creek to a black man named Cole Jefferson."

"Might have," he replied.

"Aren't the deeds supposed to be recorded before anything is sold?"

"It's all legal. Everything's taken care of. You a marshal or something?"

"I'm looking after the interests of Tex Perkins. He says Jefferson stole his land."

"You always hear that when there's a big land rush. Your man's just trying to get something for nothing. It was my land to sell."

Ben didn't like the man, but that was no reason to draw on him now that his weapon was out of sight. "Did you stake the claim yourself?"

"Me and my boys," Grantland answered. "It's a business with me. We rounded up as much land as we could and then resold it as a public service for people too old or infirm to take part in the rush."

"What's old or infirm about Cole Jefferson?"

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The tall man snickered. "Didn't you notice? He's a Negro."

Ben Snow had always prided himself on his sense of direction, and even in the deceiving half-light just before dawn he had no trouble retracing his steps to the plot of land along the creek, claimed now by both Tex Perkins and Cole Jefferson. When he saw the little tent where Jefferson had spent the night he knew it was the right place. The black man must have heard the approaching hoofbeats because he emerged from the tent almost at once. The shotgun was in his hand, as it always was. A horse grazed behind the tent.

"I've come to be your second," Ben called out as he approached. "For the duel."

"I don't need no second to put a few holes in a white man."

Ben dismounted and walked over to him. "I talked with Cyrus Grantland last night, Cole. He's no friend of yours."

"He sold me the land. That's all that matters."

They heard other hoofbeats in the distance and turned to see two riders approaching in the dawn. Jessica Shaw and her client. "Good morning!" he greeted them.

She dismounted and came up to him. "This seems more like madness all the time."

He lowered his voice. "Do you have the shells?"

"Right here."

He quickly substituted the ones he'd doctored during the night. Perkins and Jefferson had walked up to face each other. "Still time to call this off, fellas," he told them.

"We'll ride at each other from a hundred yards apart," Perkins said, "and fire the shotguns as we pass."

But Jessica would have none of it. "I don't care if you blow holes in each other, but you're not going to tear open two fine horses! You'll fight on foot or not at all!"

Finally it was agreed that they would place the shotguns on the ground twenty feet apart, retreat to fifty feet behind them, and at a signal run forward, pick up their weapons, and fire. It was madness, as Jessica had said, but somehow in the early morning there seemed to be a logic to it all.

Ben managed to substitute the shells he'd brought for Jefferson's ammunition, and with a bit of luck he hoped they'd only graze each other. If sanity took hold they might even decide to split the acres of land, but at that moment it didn't seem too likely.

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They took up their positions and Ben caught a glint of the rising sun on the western horizon. It was time. This was it. Jessica turned to him and said. "Fire a shot in the air."

He took his revolver, held it straight up, and squeezed the trigger. At the crack of the shot both men ran forward, diving for their weapons on the ground. Perkins was a half-second faster, bringing the shotgun into position before Jefferson had gotten more than a fingerhold on his.

Perkins fired without aiming as Jefferson hit the ground rolling, his back to the pellets. Before Perkins could fire a second barrel the black man pulled both triggers and Perkins fell back, the sound of the shots echoing across the flat prairie.

Ben and Jessica broke into a run as soon as Perkins went down. Jefferson had dropped the shotgun and retreated a few steps, as if surprised at the effect of his shots. "Is he—?"

It was Jessica who reached the fallen man first, bending over him to rip away the bloody shirt. "He's dead," she confirmed. "You've killed him!" She sounded as surprised as Jefferson seemed.

"It was a duel!" the black man insisted. "Everything legal."

"The United States marshal will decide that."

Ben went to her, keeping his voice low. "How could it be? I removed most of the powder from those shells myself."

She showed him the body. "These are all flesh wounds from the buckshot, but here's a deeper wound that penetrated. Somehow one pellet got a full charge behind it and went right to the heart."

"The wound looks bigger than a shotgun pellet would make. Has he got another weapon on him?"

"I got no weapon," the black man told them, coming up now to join in the conversation. "This means I can keep the land, doesn't it?"

"You're in trouble, Mr. Jefferson," Jessica told him, and Ben had a feeling that they were all in trouble.

Cole Jefferson still refused to leave his campsite, in spite of what had happened. He spoke vaguely of a brother on his way from Alabama to help him, but had no idea when the man would arrive. "The marshal will come for you," Jessica warned him. "This has to be heard in a court of law."

Cole Jefferson shrugged. "Let him come. I'm not leaving the land I bought and paid for fair and square. If they have to carry me out of here, I'll take some of them with me."

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Finally they placed a blanket over Tex Perkins's body and tied it to the back of his horse. Ben and Jessica led it into Guthrie behind them. He was surprised how little attention they attracted as they rode in past the lines of tents and half-built houses. Just another death, another tombstone for the little burial ground he'd noticed at the other end of town. On the frontier cemeteries often came before schools.

"I'll take the body over to Marshal Foxx," Jessica said, "and tell him what happened. You'd better report in to Mr. Thurston. He won't be happy."

"I know."

Ben rode down the dusty main street to the land attorney's big tent. The place was crowded even at this early hour, and as he tied Oats to the hitching post he saw people jostling for positions on line. Inside, August Thurston was sorting through the papers on his desk, waiting for the first of the day's clients to complete their forms.

" 'Morning, Mr. Thurston."

"How'd it go, Ben? Did you stop the duel?"

"Not exactly. Jessica and I hit on a plan to substitute weak charges in the shotgun shells so's no one would get killed. Something went wrong. Jessica's at the marshal's office with the body now."

Thurston hit the desk with his fist, turning a few heads among the would-be clients. "Damn! Didn't I tell you we couldn't have anything like that?"

"I don't know what happened," Ben admitted.

"If I know Foxx, he won't let a Negro get away with killing a white man, even in a duel."

His words were confirmed a few minutes later when Jessica Shaw joined them. "The marshal's going out with a couple of deputies to arrest Cole Jefferson."

Thurston grunted. "And I've got a dead client."

"You've got a live one if you take on Jefferson's case."

"Are you mad, woman?" He lowered his voice as others looked their way again. "What's he going to pay me with?"

"With Perkins dead he's got the land. That's worth something."

The attorney wasn't convinced. "I'd rather stay out of it. There's enough people in this tent right now to keep me busy for the next two months."

"Then let me handle Jefferson's defense."

August Thurston chuckled at the idea. "Have you ever tried a case in court?"

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"No," she admitted. "You know I'm just out of law school."

"Go ahead," he said with a dismissive wave. "You and Jefferson deserve each other."

She started out of the tent, then stopped. "You coming?" she asked Ben.

Ben looked from one to the other, suddenly uncertain for whom he was working. "Need me for anything?" he asked Thurston.

"Go ahead," the lawyer answered. "Make sure she doesn't get in more trouble. Just be back here this afternoon. I might need you then."

The air outside was alive with the sound of hammers and saws. Wagonloads of lumber were departing for homesites, and if anything the place was more filled with bustle and noise than on his arrival. Ben mounted up and confessed to Jessica Shaw, "I thought you were a law clerk or something. You don't look like a—"

"Real lawyer?" she completed with a laugh. "That's my trouble, I guess. Back East it wouldn't be quite so unusual. There've been women lawyers for hundreds of years. Portia was a lawyer, remember."

"Who?"

Another laugh. "Never mind. It's Shakespeare."

"Why aren't you back East? What're you doing in a place like Guthrie with someone like Thurston?"

"Oh, he's all right. He knows how to make fast money by being in the right place at the right time. These land rushes will be going on for years, until the entire territory is settled. I just graduated from law school and was admitted to the bar a few months ago. I figure if I can work out here with Thurston for three or four years I'll have saved up enough money to open my own law office."

"He picked you out of law school?"

"I guess we found each other. He wanted a law clerk—male, of course—to come out here with him. I persuaded him to hire me. I told him I could clerk for him and maybe take on some cases too. He agreed."

Ben glanced sideways at her as they rode down the street. "Any romantic involvement?"

"Of course not! The man is in his forties and not exactly handsome!" But they were at the marshal's office by that time and they dismounted together.

Marshal Foxx was a lawman of the old West, the sort Ben had encountered all too often in his wanderings. His goals were law and

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order, not necessarily justice, and he wasn't one to spend much time on an accused man's rights. He had graying hair and a moustache to match, and wore his gunbelt low on his hip. "We're just riding out to bring Jefferson in," he told Jessica. "It shouldn't take long."

"I'll be acting as his attorney if he'll have me," she informed the marshal. "This is Ben Snow, who's assisting me."

Foxx squinted at Ben, as if trying to recall a reward poster. "You two won't help things any out there. My deputies and I can bring him in."

"I insist on accompanying you," Jessica told him firmly. "One body on the back of a horse is enough for today."

Foxx could see she meant business. "All right, you can go—but not him! I know a gunfighter when I see one."

She patted Ben's arm. "Wait for me at Rango's place."

"All right."

He watched her ride out with Foxx and his deputies, wondering when he'd see her again.

It was still morning, not yet ten o'clock, and the crowd was thin at Rango's Saloon. Rango himself was behind the bar and when he spotted Ben at a table against the wall, he strolled over to wipe it off. "I wouldn't take you for a morning drinker, Mr. Snow."

"I'm not. Got any sparkling water?"

"Hygeia Sparkling Lithia Water, the best there is."

"Give me a glass."

When he returned with it, the barkeep told Ben, "We're the only saloon in Guthrie has this. I ordered a couple of cases because I figured our lady customers would like it." His words may have been meant as an insult but Ben chose to ignore them.

"You seen Cyrus Grantland around this morning?" he asked.

"Not yet. A little early for him."

Ben sat there a while longer, sipping the lithia water. He was just thinking about leaving when he saw Grantland ride by on his horse, heading out of town. Ben left the drink unfinished and headed for the door, but by the time he reached Oats the tall man had vanished in the crowd of riders and wagons.

It was some time later when Jessica Shaw returned to town with Marshal Foxx. The deputies had Cole Jefferson in tow, and even from a distance Ben could see that the black man had been beaten. "It was terrible," Jessica told him. "I know they'd have shot him if I hadn't been there. Foxx doesn't want a trial, he wants a lynching!"

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"Could you get me in to see Jefferson?"

"What for?"

"I want to ask him a couple of questions about this land deal that Grantland arranged. Now that he's in a jail cell he may be more willing to talk about it."

"I'll see."

By midafternoon she'd persuaded Jefferson to talk with Ben, and Marshal Foxx agreed to a ten-minute visit. They met in the cell adjoining Foxx's office, with the marshal himself watching through the bars. "No funny stuff," he warned, "or you'll be in there with him."

"I'm not going to help him escape," Jessica assured Foxx. "When he walks out of here it'll be as a legally free man."

Ben sat down on the bunk next to the Negro. "I want to ask you about Cyrus Grantland and this land deal. That's the reason you're here, after all."

"I'm here because I killed a white man in a fair fight. It was a duel, with you two as witnesses. You saw it was fair." He was almost pleading with them, aware at last of the deep trouble that confronted him.

"What did Grantland say to you the first time?"

"I planned to be here in time for the land rush, but my horse pulled up lame and I arrived a day late. I was trying to find some land for sale when he stopped me in the street. Said he had good land not far from town. I paid what he asked, and he took me out there. He gave me the claim, but said I'd better stay there till things got settled. He warned that the area was alive with claim jumpers."

"It certainly is," Ben commented. "But he still had to get that false claim registered and how did he hope to do that when Tex Perkins was there first?"

The black man shook his head. "I don't know. He told me the land's original claimant had been killed, trampled to death during the rush, trying to get a second parcel for himself."

"And you believed him?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

Ben Snow nodded. "I'm satisfied," he told Jessica. "Do you have any questions?"

She sat down facing Cole Jefferson. "I just want you to know I'm going to get you out of here."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Marshal Foxx unlocked the cell door for them.

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* * *

It was after four o'clock and Ben had no qualms about drinking a little beer at that hour. He was treating Jessica to a half-pint at Rango's when Cyrus Grantland came through the door. Though there were other tables empty, he made directly for theirs.

"Mr. Grantland," Jessica said, extending her hand from where she sat.

"I didn't know you were a friend of this man, Jessica," he muttered, indicating Ben.

"He works for Mr. Thurston," she explained.

"Does he now? Last night he accused me of stealing land for that Negro, Jefferson."

"Jefferson's in jail for killing Perkins in a duel."

Grantland grinned, showing a gold tooth. "That's what I heard. Takes care of both of them, don't it?"

Ben reached up and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. "They've got another empty cell there. Foxx is saving it for you."

Grantland's laugh came again, and this time his hand dipped inside his coat. Ben yanked him forward and they both hit the floor, but Grantland was on top. In his hand was a skinning knife aimed at Ben's throat.

In an instant Jessica acted. From her boot came a little derringer pistol which she pressed against the side of Grantland's head. "Drop it *now,* or you're a dead man!"

That was when Marshal Foxx walked in the door. Someone had seen him in the street and called for help. "Arrest him," Ben gasped, struggling to stand up. "He tried to kill me."

The marshal shook his head. "It's no crime trying, at least not in Guthrie. I'm arresting Miss Jessica here."

"Me!" Jessica gasped. "What for?"

"The doc says that the bigger, deeper wound in Perkins's chest was caused by a bullet, not pellets from a shotgun. I listened to your story about what happened, and no one else was present. You were the first one to reach the body after the duel, though, Miss Jessica. I think you slipped this little pistol from your boot and shot Tex Perkins while you bent over the body."

August Thurston joined them at the marshal's office, summoned by Ben to keep Jessica out of jail. The attorney, wearing another of his fancy vests, stormed into Foxx's office in full fury. "Look here, Marshal, you can't hold two people for the same crime. You're cer-

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tainly not claiming they collaborated in killing Perkins, so either Jessica or Cole Jefferson has got to be innocent."

Marshal Foxx had an answer for that. "Jefferson fought an illegal duel that wounded the man, but it was Miss Jessica who finished him off with her little pistol. Can you think of any other explanation?"

Everyone was talking at once—Jessica defending her innocence while Thurston argued for her release. Even Jefferson was yelling something from his cell. "I couldn't have fired the shot without Ben hearing it," Jessica insisted.

"Maybe he's in it with you," Foxx replied. "All I know is that Perkins wasn't killed with a shotgun."

Ben simply sat there shaking his head. He hadn't wanted to speak yet, not until he knew everything, but he could see that events were outrunning him. "Madness," he said. "An early morning madness."

They quieted down and Marshal Foxx asked, "What madness? The duel?"

"No, the sun rising on the western horizon. This morning, just before the duel began, I saw a glint of sun in the west. It shouldn't have been there, not when the sun rises in the east."

"What in hell are you talking about?" Foxx asked, as baffled as the others.

"Jessica and I removed most of the gunpowder from those shotgun shells. Neither man could have been seriously injured in that duel. It wasn't Jessica who fired the fatal shot into Perkins's chest. It was someone hidden in some brush to the west, his rifle barrel catching and reflecting the rising sun in the east."

"Why would anyone do that?" Foxx wanted to know.

"I think it had to do with registering the deeds for the land. Jefferson told us earlier that Cyrus Grantland said the original claimant for that piece of property had been killed later in the land rush. But Grantland was wrong. When Perkins appeared at your tent yesterday, Mr. Thurston, there were suddenly two claimants. I believe you registered the claim for Jefferson, and we can prove it through the records. You were a party to Grantland's crooked scheme, and when one of the claimants had to be removed, you decided the duel was the perfect opportunity. You were out there this morning with your rifle. It was Perkins's bad luck that he was facing you and took the bullet in the chest. Otherwise you'd have shot Jefferson."

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August Thurston lifted himself to his full height, as if facing an unfriendly judge in some frontier courtroom. "You have libeled me, sir!"

But Ben shook his head. "When I arrived at your tent earlier, it was obvious you'd just gotten there yourself. There were people crowded outside and you were at your desk alone, waiting for the first clients to complete their forms. I told you there'd been a fatality during the duel, but never mentioned which of them had died. You said you doubted the marshal would let a Negro get away with killing a white man. You knew Perkins was dead because you were there. You fired the rifle that killed him. I thought I heard an echo from the shotguns, but on that flat land there were no hills for the sound to bounce off of. What I heard was the crack of your rifle."

August Thurston was still protesting his innocence when he came to trial a month later, but by that time Cyrus Grantland had agreed to testify against him, admitting his part in the land scheme. Thurston's rifle had been recently fired, and his horse's hoofs bore traces of soil from out near the dueling site. It took the jury only an hour to find him guilty.

Jessica Shaw took over his law business while she waited for an office to be built. The town was settling down after the furor of that first week. Cole Jefferson's brother finally arrived and the two of them built a fine log cabin at the edge of Buffalo Creek. Ben Snow stayed for a time in the agreeable surroundings and was very close to settling down. But with the coming of winter he moved on once more. Oats was growing restless and so was he.

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A University of Pittsburg creative writing teacher, Lisa Lepovetsky has wide-ranging interests in her field. With more than 150 publications of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction to her credit, she has become involved in the production of mystery parties and dinner theatre, and manages to turn out crime short stories such as this first contribution to EQMM *as well . . .*

JOE FROG'S PLACE

by LISA LEPOVETSKY

They called him Joe Frog. That wasn't his real name, but then I never found out what his real name was. Jesse said the nickname had something to do with the army and a French woman he knew. You know, the Joe part from G.I. Joe, and the Frog because that's what soldiers called French people back then. But sometimes Jesse pulled my leg, so I was never sure whether to believe him or not.

I don't even know which war it would have been—Korea, I'd guess, from how old Joe looked. Maybe *the Big One,* as my dad likes to say. Jesse probably knew, but he got so snotty. When I asked him anything, he rolled his eyes at the ceiling and whispered snide stuff to his pool buddies. Then they all laughed, and I was left squirming in my chair. I hate that. Sometimes it's easier not to ask. That's just one of the things I learned being Jesse's girl.

Joe Frog had this bar up there on top of Whitehollow Road. You know, where the houses end and the really tall virgin hemlocks of the state forest stand up straight and safe. Nobody messes with the state forest—it's like sacred or mythical or something. Joe Frog's little red box of a tavern still sits up there like it's protecting the woods from us people.

I suppose it could work the other way around, but I don't think this town needs protection; there's nothing a bear or hawk could do to these folks that they haven't already done to themselves. Harrods Run is less than a thumbtack hole in a big map, and nobody farther

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than thirty-five miles away has ever heard of it. There are only three main roads in town, and they all lead out. But we never use them. If you're born here, you grow up here, and get buried in the Willow Grove cemetery before winter freezes the ground too hard to dig. And winter comes earlier every year.

Anyway, Joe Frog's Dew Drop Inn wasn't exactly the Ritz. The middle two letters on that green neon sign didn't light up anymore, so people called it the Dew-op Inn. It was a joke at first, but for years that's what it was called. Or just Joe Frog's. Saturday nights, the gravel lot was packed, and parked cars lined the berm of Whitehollow Road for a mile. The cops could have made a bundle ticketing them for still having wheels on the pavement. But they never did. Hell, most of the cops were in Joe Frog's on Saturday night, too.

Joe had an old pool table back in one corner. You could just see it through the smoke. It sat behind six or seven square metal tables with that Formica stuff on top that's supposed to look like black marble but somehow never does. The felt on the pool table was wearing thin near the pockets, but it was still in one piece. I was never sure how level the slate was. Some things seem fine when you look at them from the outside, but when you get up real close and bend down, they're all twisted and warped out of shape underneath. That's another thing I learned being Jesse's girl.

Dusty plastic lights that looked kind of like stained glass if you squinted hung from the ceiling at Joe Frog's. They had fruit and trees and stuff like that on them and were dim enough to make even ugly girls look okay. I liked that. Little trains smoked across the wallpaper where it wasn't stained from a leak in the ceiling or somebody's beer bottle missing its target during a brawl.

Not that there were many fights at Joe Frog's—he wouldn't allow it. He'd just head over to the table that was getting mean or a little too rowdy and stand up even straighter than he usually did. Then he'd say something like: "Well, if you folks've had enough, it's gettin' late, so you might want to be rollin' on home."

Mostly people got the message. Joe was a big man—mostly tall, but thick, too. He even had big hair, silver, in one of those flattop styles. He put cream or something on it. When it got long, it still stood straight up, like a thick snowy forest on the top of his head. He just didn't look like somebody you'd want to mess with. But most of the regulars knew he was only like that when he got mad.

Jesse and I dropped into the Dew-op nearly every Saturday night last winter. Ruth is Jesse's mom, and she's also my mom's best

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friend, and you know how that tune goes. We always played together at the park when we were little kids, even though he's three years older than I am, and everybody figured we'd grow up and get married. Including us, I guess. A couple of times in grade school, I tried to tell my mom about Jesse and how he did weird things sometimes, especially when he got mad at me, scary things. But she never listened. After all, he was Ruth's only son.

Once Mom found the remnants of something furry in a pile of ashes near where we'd been playing. She came running into the house, screaming about how could anybody be so sick as to do that to a little helpless animal. I hadn't even seen Jesse do it. He was like that, fast and deadly. Jesse had this innocent look about him, so blond and blue-eyed that nobody could ever believe he'd even pick his nose, let alone do anything really nasty. One look at Jesse's face that day and I knew what would happen to me if I told. I never did, even though I couldn't sit for two days after that whipping.

We'd only been really dating for a couple years, though we'd kind of hung around together since junior high. I didn't date many other guys during high school; I think they were afraid Jesse would think they were horning in on his territory. So naturally, I became Jesse's girl after high school. It was okay. Jesse was pretty good to me most of the time, and he got really scary when I tried to break up with him once. The other girls drooled over him, and kept telling me how lucky I was. I figured it was fate, that we were just supposed to end up with each other.

After graduation, I had planned to move to Pittsburgh and live with my cousins while I studied retailing, but Mom wasn't too thrilled with the idea. She'd always say, "Audrey, Pittsburgh is almost two hundred miles away. Why would you want to go so far? You have a good job and a family here who loves you. And there's Jesse to think about." Mom worried a lot about Jesse. Sometimes I wondered whether she knew how he really was. But of course we never talked about stuff like that, real stuff.

Then she reminded me how my dad had pulled some strings to land me this secretarial job at the mill. Back then it seemed easier to just stay here with my folks after graduation while I decided what to do. It makes them happy to have me around, since my brother Harry went off and joined the navy. As Dad says, I can quit work and go to the city any time I want. Pittsburgh is pretty far from Harrods Run. And it seemed like a million miles from Jesse.

* * *

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I'd only been to Joe Frog's a couple of times before I started going with Jesse, because I was underage. But Jesse wanted to play pool with his buddies, and Joe's was the only decent table in town; if I wanted to be with him, I had to go to the Dew-op, too. It's not like Jesse was the only fish in the sea, but he treated me okay when he wasn't drinking too much, and it got me out of the house. When you hit twenty-two, you don't have a lot to say to your folks anymore.

To tell the truth, Jesse and I didn't really talk much either. When we went to Joe Frog's he spent most of his time at the pool table. I'm not all that interested in pool, so I started sitting at the bar. I found out most people who sit on wobbly bar stools keep pretty much to themselves, either bent over their drinks real close, or watching the game on TV. There was always some game on the tube—football or baseball or basketball or hockey, depending on the season. I didn't watch TV, though; I just sat and talked to one of the other guys' girlfriends or Joe Frog, if he was in the mood. Sometimes I just listened to the conversations around me. The Johansen twins were usually good for a grin. They're both a little slow, and they yell at each other as though they're deaf, and fight like crazy. Jesse teased them, but I don't think they really understood. At least I hope not.

Joe Frog had this photograph behind the bar, between the cash register and that plastic canister full of tall salted pretzel sticks. I loved sucking on those things. Then, when all the salt was gone and they were just getting soggy, I just gobbled them down. The taste always reminded me of how my dad had brought them home when he stopped somewhere after work and lost track of the time. It took a little of the curse off him missing dinner.

Anyway, it was hard to see that photograph in the dim light of the bar, because the picture was so small. The frame was silver and had little curlicues and flowers all around it, so I figured the picture must be real important to Joe. It showed a soldier standing next to a woman—I could see that much—and he had his left arm around her shoulder. The weather must've been real cold where they were, because they both wore those heavy coats that stop halfway between the knee and ankle; his looked like wool, and hers was dark fur. Her hands were hidden inside a black fur muff. Her hair curled soft like little feathers from under a round hat, and kind of disappeared where it met the furry collar of her coat, and they both stared right at the camera. They kind of frowned and looked like they were about to say something really important to the person with the camera. Maybe they were just cold.

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I figured the soldier must be Joe Frog—it even looked like a younger, thinner version of him. And I like to think the woman was the French girl he loved during whatever war it was. I mean, maybe she called him something like Jerome or Floyd or Herbert or whatever his name really is. Only she said it with that cute French accent, and kind of wrinkled up her nose when she said it, so that his heart stopped for a second when she called him.

I started to tell Jesse about the picture one time when we were at the drive-in, but he just looked at me like I was growing hair on my eyeballs or something. So I changed the subject. Jesse was definitely not the most romantic guy in the world. Sometimes, he had this way of making important things seem like wasted effort. And I didn't want to feel that way about Joe Frog's girl.

Joe Frog had this big old black dog that hung around the place, too. She was pretty fat because of everybody feeding her Joe's homemade pickled eggs and coleslaw. He called that dog Genevieve, only he pronounced it French, *John-vee-ev or something like that.* Everybody else called her Jenny. I thought Genevieve was a pretty name for a dog, and I wanted to say it the way Joe Frog did, because that made it even better. But I just called her Jenny. I knew Jesse'd give me a hard time if I tried to call her John-vee-ev, and everybody at the mill would hear about it the next day, so I never tried. Some things just aren't worth the hassle.

Joe Frog wasn't a big one for talking, but he always had his standard jokes for the newcomers, to make them feel like one of the regulars—kind of an initiation, you might say. He'd come over to their table or bar stool and start by asking if they wanted something to eat. Before they could say no, he started listing what he'd got.

"Well," he'd say, "we've got the best pickled eggs and pickled beets in the county. I make 'em myself out back. Learned how to pickle from my daddy. And there's coleslaw and balony and cheese sandwiches. And I think I've still got one more henway left."

"Henway?" They always fell for it, every one. "What's a henway?" By this time everyone in the bar is quiet and waiting for the punch.

"About four pounds, on the average," Joe'd say, as serious as could be, and everybody'd clap and cheer. It was all done in fun, and I never saw anyone get mad about being suckered into it. Especially after Joe Frog offered them a free drink.

It got to be like a password to get into the Dew-op. Everybody called, "Hey Joe, what's a henway?" when they came in, and he'd laugh and yell back, "About four pounds."

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Joe Frog had one of those clocks that runs backward over the bar, too, right over the silver-framed photograph. And there was a big glass with "Bet You Can't" in red letters down one side sitting high on a shelf. Jesse and the guys were always trying to get him to let them try it, but he'd laugh and shake his head and say they couldn't even handle the little ones yet. And that was the truth.

One night last May we got to Joe Frog's late because Jesse had to fix a leak under his sink. He lived in this little apartment house down behind the paper mill. It doesn't smell so good down there, but the rent's cheap. The landlord, Mr. Summag, figures for the rent he charges, those guys can do their own repairs. Jesse called him Mr. Scumbag, but not to his face, of course. It was the only place in town he could afford to live.

Jesse fixed his own sink that night, but he took some extra time and figured out a way to sabotage his landlord's lines. That way, every time Jesse wanted, he could turn off all the hot or cold water to the rest of the house. Jesse cackled every time he turned off the cold water and Mr. Summag started screaming in the shower.

"That Scumbag's quite a singer," Jesse'd say. He's a real card.

So anyway, we walked into Joe Frog's around nine that night, and things were pretty lively, even for a Saturday night. No fights or rowdy stuff, but something was different—a lot of laughing and fun. Nothing you could put your finger on, but it just felt real good to be there that night. Even the guys hanging around the pool table were talking to each other and smiling a little, instead of making rude cracks. It was like Christmas or something.

Jesse calls out, "What's a henway, Joe?" and everybody laughs and yells back, "Four pounds." Then Jesse's pal Frank offered us a couple of stools at the bar.

"How they hangin', Jess?" Frank asks. "You heard about ol' Jenny? Tell 'em, Joe."

Joe Frog walked over, smiling and nodding like one of those dolls on the dashboard of an old car, and I couldn't imagine what would make him look like that. Just seeing his face made me smile, too, like some terrific contagious disease that everybody wants to get.

"Jenny had pups Thursday night," he says. "Six of 'em."

"Shoot," says Jesse, and I looked over at Joe Frog again. His face was bright and glowing, like if you turned off all the lights in the bar, you could still find him in the dark easy.

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"I didn't even know she was knocked up." Jesse can be a little crude sometimes. He says stuff like that on purpose to startle people.

Joe Frog didn't care, though. He just slapped Jesse on the back and laughed. "I didn't either," he says. "She's so goddam fat, I couldn't tell. But Thursday she was actin' strange and kind of restless, moanin' and whimperin' around the place. I got real worried, thought she might be sick or somethin'. I couldn't stand to have anything happen to her, so I closed up the place and ran her out to the vet's in the afternoon. Doc Moore—she really likes him—told me she was gonna have puppies any minute, and by ten that night they were all born."

That was the most I'd ever heard Joe Frog say at one time. Then he took us by the elbows and led us back into the kitchen to see them, even though it was obvious Jesse wasn't too keen on the idea. He's funny about birth and bodily functions and stuff like that. He'll make jokes and all, but he doesn't really like to think about it seriously. He won't even look at me real close when we're in bed.

I thought it was great about Jenny, though. I went right over to the big cardboard box to see. It had an old olive-green wool blanket jammed into the bottom. And there's Jenny, all comfy on the blanket, and six little black wormy-looking things smaller than my clenched fist squirming around her belly and peeping like black baby chicks.

"Aren't they somethin'?" Joe Frog asks. "Aren't they just the prettiest little things you ever saw?"

Jesse shrugged and glanced back to the bar, but I said they were downright beautiful. Then I said it again, slower and almost in a whisper. "They're beautiful, Joe. Beautiful, beautiful babies." And I really meant it.

Joe Frog looked away for a minute, and his face got a strange expression. "I love babies," he said, and his eyes got all wet-looking.

I was worried he was going to cry. Not that I'd mind, but I was afraid what Jesse might say. Then all of a sudden he was smiling again, and took us out to the bar to buy us a drink. That's always the way to Jesse's heart.

When we sat back down, Jesse whispered something in Frank's ear, and I heard Frank say, "They even look like him a little." Then they both looked at Joe Frog and burst out laughing.

A few minutes later, Jesse and Frank were playing pool and I just sat staring at that old photograph in the silver frame again, half-listening to the conversations around me. Frank's girl Sharalee was

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sitting with her sister at a nearby table. They were all excited about their double wedding coming in the fall.

My eyes kept moving back and forth between the photograph by the pretzel sticks and the door to the back room, where I could just see a corner of the box Jenny and her babies were snuggled in. Joe Frog was down at the other end of the bar, grinning and talking to one of his old-timer friends. He kept glancing into the back room. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but Joe kept running his hand through his hair and shaking his head, like he was amazed by something.

Then Joe did something strange. He came up to my end of the bar and grabbed the framed photograph. I'd never even seen him look at it before. He took it over to where the old-timers sat and pointed to it, saying something so low I couldn't hear his voice. One of them got up and went to the men's room then, and the others got real quiet and just looked into their beers. One guy blew his nose into his big red bandanna hankie. After a minute, Joe said something else, and they all smiled again, and he put the picture back where I could see it.

It was another two weeks before Jesse and I went back to Joe Frog's. We'd had a big fight the night we saw the puppies, and this was the first time we'd been out together since.

Jesse had made fun of me after he and Frank had finished playing pool that last time. "Oooo," Jesse had whined in a fake high-pitched voice. "They're just beeooteeful, Joe. Just beeooteeful babies." Then he and all his pals laughed so hard I hoped they'd bust a gut.

I got up and left. I'd never done that before, but I waltzed out that front door without so much as a fare-thee-well, and walked the two miles through town to my parents' house. It was cold that night, and I didn't have any gloves or pockets, so I just tucked my hands into the opposite sleeves of my black wool coat, like an old Chinaman.

Maybe putting my arms in that position reminded me of that dark-haired woman with the muff inside that fancy silver frame. I could see her eyes, peering into the camera so seriously, like she knew that picture would be all Joe Frog would have to remember her by. I knew I was crying even before the tears chilled my cheeks. Just like I knew she'd had Joe Frog's baby.

I avoided Jesse at the mill for a couple days, so he came over to my parents' house the Wednesday of that week to see me. I was

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sitting on the porch steps, and didn't move over to make room for him. He stood on the sidewalk, twisting the gold-and-onyx ring I'd given him for his birthday. It was too big and I'd never gotten it sized.

"So what's the big problem, Aud?" he asked. "I haven't seen you much at work. You on the rag or something?"

There wasn't much point trying to explain. He'd say I was making too big a deal of everything. So I just shrugged.

"This isn't about that night at Joe Frog's, is it?"

I looked at him, surprised. That was pretty perceptive, for Jesse. He read my look wrong and scowled. "That jerk's always making the rest of us look bad. He better watch out or somebody's gonna show him what's what."

I didn't like the sound of that, and I remembered what he'd done to Mr. Summag. So I said, "I'm not in the mood for company, that's all."

"Well, get back in the mood pretty quick, hear? I'm not very patient." Like I didn't know. Then he just walked back down the street. I didn't watch him go.

By the end of the week, the girls at work were asking if we'd broken up or anything, and I just didn't answer. They thought I was being cute, but truth is, I didn't know. I just knew deep inside that something I'd thought was there before wasn't there anymore. I hated watching everybody else hanging around the lunchroom in couples while I just sat by myself. Friday, when Jesse caught up with me during our break and kissed me behind the coffee machine, rubbing himself against my crotch, I was ready to give him another chance. His stupid jokes didn't seem like such a big deal anymore. So Saturday night we were back at Joe Frog's like nothing ever happened.

"Hey Joe, what's a henway?"

When Joe Frog looked up from the beer he was pouring, I knew something was wrong. His face looked all dark and grey, like those mirrors over at Pietro's Italian restaurant. No difference in color, really, nothing you can put your finger on, but dimmer and colder, like someone had turned out the light. He glanced up and nodded at Jesse, then kept pouring, like he hadn't heard the joke.

Everyone seemed quieter than usual. Even the Johansen twins weren't yelling, but just sat muttering in the corner by the pool table. And nobody was playing pool. The plastic light over the table

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was off and the cue sticks racked. I'd never seen that corner cleaned up and dark. I shivered. Even Jesse noticed the difference.

We sat at a table with Frank and Sharalee. Jesse cocked his thumb toward the bar. "What's with the Frog?" he asked. I noticed the white mark on his finger where the onyx ring used to be.

Frank leaned across the table and whispered, "His dog died."

Jesse didn't look too surprised. "Jenny? No kidding. When?"

"Thursday. He thinks somebody poisoned her. He's still got her in that big box in the kitchen, and he won't bury her. I heard some of the old-timers trying to talk him into it earlier tonight."

"That's disgusting," Jesse hissed. "What if the board of health gets wind of this?"

Frank chuckled. "If he keeps that dead dog around much longer, everybody'll get wind of it. Get it? Wind?" Frank always explained his jokes as if everyone else was an idiot.

Jesse laughed out loud and slapped him on the back. Sharalee was dabbing at her nails with an emery board.

"What about the pups?" I asked.

"Oh yeah, the pups." Frank took a long draw of his beer. "Well, I hear they only lasted a few days. Old Jenny was past the age of taking care of a family, I guess. Joe probably buried them in the garden out back or something."

"He could've flushed them down the toilet," Jesse said. "They were no bigger than a bunch of turds anyway."

Frank laughed and left to buy everybody a round. I watched Joe Frog fill the glasses. He never raised his eyes, and I was glad. I told Jesse I wanted to leave.

"Okay," he said. "This place is dead tonight, anyway."

As we stood by the bar getting ready to leave, I saw two of the old-timers walk into the kitchen with Joe Frog. He wiped his eyes with a big red hankie as they went. I wanted to say something to Jesse, tell him what was happening, but I didn't have the right words somehow. As Jesse threw a couple of bucks on the bar to pay for our drinks, I glanced toward the cash register. The silver-framed photograph was gone.

After that night, Jesse and I never went back to the Dew-op together. The Saturday-night crowd pretty much moved on to more cheerful quarters. Frank and Sharalee met us every weekend at the new bar Pietro added onto his restaurant. It's nicer there, I suppose. They don't have a pool table, but they've got two fancy dart boards, and that seemed to keep Jesse and Frank happy for a while. Shar-

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alee wasn't very good company, though. She didn't say much, just waved her left hand around as much as possible to show off her diamond.

I read in the local paper last Tuesday that the Dew Drop Inn was closing, and it took me several minutes to make the connection with Joe Frog. Those two letters had been missing for so long, like a smile with two front teeth gone, that it didn't look right, all spelled out like that. Then I realized it was Joe Frog who was quoted (as the nameless "proprietor"), saying he had no immediate plans, was just closing up, leaving for parts unknown. I felt like I'd lost a relative. There were things I needed to say to him before he left, things I thought he'd want to know.

Wednesday was one of those hazy, hot, headachy days when you know a storm must be coming, but don't see it yet. I called in sick at the mill and waited in bed until my parents went to work. I didn't want to have to explain; I wasn't even sure myself why I needed to go up there. Jesse had taken off suddenly a couple of weeks back, and nobody knew where he'd gone. The time apart had given me a chance to think about us, and I knew I didn't want him back. And I knew I had to explain some things to Joe Frog, to clear my own slate. I walked through town and up the hill.

A rented U-Haul van sat outside the bar when I got there. Boxes and crates lay scattered all over the hot gravel drive like school kids waiting for the last bus. I saw Joe Frog walk past the window, but I didn't call out or wave. There was something I wanted to find in that collection of junk first. In case he got mad and chased me away, I needed to see it one more time.

I felt like a thief, peering into the boxes and bags laying around. I tried not to touch anything, just looked carefully into the loose-packed parcels. It was like Joe Frog had tossed things randomly into containers, not caring where they went. Inside one cardboard box were long stainless-steel forks wrapped in a rubber band, several packs of toilet paper, and a big pair of binoculars. In another, a couple of shirts were jammed between a bottle of industrial cleaner and a blender. It seemed like the packing was more important than the unpacking would be.

Finally, I found what I was looking for. Tucked into a small wooden crate were four items: the "I Bet You Can't" glass, two big jars of Joe's special dark pickling brine, and a silver frame. The picture was backward, but I didn't need to see the front. For some

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reason, I felt happy just to see it there, and bent down to be close to it. It was then I saw the six small black forms floating in one of the brine jars, just about the size of six large pickled hen's eggs.

"You're Jesse's girl, aren't you?"

Joe's voice sounded like thunder next to me, and I must have jumped a foot. He put one hand on my shoulder. I thought my heart would leap out of my mouth if I opened it. I just nodded.

"I figured I might see you before I left." His grey eyes smiled, though his face didn't. "I'm glad you stopped by."

"I have some things I need to tell you," I began, but Joe held up his hand and shook his head.

"No need," he said. "I know it was Jesse killed my dog. I found this in the back room the next night." He held out the onyx ring I'd given Jesse. I took it.

"I'm not seeing Jesse anymore," I said. I needed to tell him that for some reason.

"I know," he said. "Nobody is." He looked around him, his glance touching each box and crate in the driveway individually. Finally he stopped on the one holding the jars of brine and the silver frame.

"You know," he said slowly, still looking at the jars, "you have to decide what's important in this life and what's not important. And you have to find a way to keep the important things with you, no matter what. There's always a way. You know what I mean?"

I nodded. When I turned to go back down the hill, Joe's hand slid from my shoulder. I did know what he meant. I knew that Jesse wasn't coming back, and I didn't care. And I knew that I had to find a way to get out of Harrods Run as soon as possible. What I didn't know was what floated in the second jar of brine I'd seen. Maybe it was just eggs or beets. Maybe it was something else, something as secret as John-vee-ev's puppies.

But I also knew it wasn't important for me to know. It was just important to Joe Frog, or whatever his name was.

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In this first mystery for EQMM, *Milwaukee journalist Doug Armstrong draws from his own experience as a radio commentator; but radio is not the only medium in which Mr. Armstrong has made his mark. Currently a movie critic for the Milwaukee Journal, he has served as a reporter on overseas assignments for a number of newspapers including the* Chicago Tribune *and was, for a time, co-editor of* Once a Year *magazine. . . .*

DEAD AIR

by DOUG ARMSTRONG

Tom Titan cleared his throat emphatically as he pulled the headphones back over his ears and scooted up to the front of his chair.

"Stand by!" he called.

Jerry Rockman watched to see whether he planned to make glib conversation before the traffic and the forecast. The amber glow of the news computer screen was in Rockman's glasses, but he could see that Titan's eyes were fixed on the control board, his index finger aloft and ready to point in Rockman's direction. As if Rockman couldn't hear the end of the commercial for himself.

The finger descended like an accusation. Rockman punched on his microphone. "Let's go up in the air now to check traffic one more time with Myra."

Rockman shut his mike off, and his headphones flooded with the pulsating sound of the helicopter blade and the sunny soprano voice of Myra Meredith. "Traffic is heavy but there are no problems to report on the freeway system at this time, Jerry. Back to you."

Rockman didn't pause.

"Your forecast from the K-ZAP weather center calls for mostly clear skies today, a high of only twenty-eight degrees. Currently it's seventeen degrees in the city. I'm Jerry Rockman. It's seven thirty-five and you're listening to KZAP radio news."

Titan jumped on the mark with the station's up-tempo jingle, using the fader to slide his own voice in under the drum machine

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rhythms and synthesizer horns. He pumped the station's current slogan and hyped a quick reference to its new promotion, a family trip giveaway.

As the jingle crescendoed to its finale, anonymous vocalists belting out the station's call letters and frequency, Rockman wondered how they could sound so joyous and intoxicated over such mundane information.

Titan tripped the next tape cart by tapping a switch on the studio's main board. It sent Phil Collins's latest hit out over the airwaves. The label on the tape cart indicated the interval on the introduction before lyrics were sung, and Titan timed his chatter to go smoothly and precisely down to the final second.

"K-ZAP ninety-six and Empire Pictures are pleased to bring you the special advance screening . . ."

While Titan worked solo, reading copy from his loose-leaf binder, Rockman quietly stacked up the tape carts of the news pieces he'd just used. He'd need fresh tapes or recut versions of these stories for his eight o'clock.

It was time to walk back to the newsroom to make them. But he waited to see if Titan had anything to say to him off the air. Maybe some clue about the unexplained chill that had settled over KZAP's FM studio that morning. The usual fun and games had been canceled. The place seemed to be all cool chrome, glass, and Formica surfaces. Titan had even drawn the miniblinds shut along the outer corridor windows. The fishbowl was temporarily closed to the curious.

Titan's grouchy mood had not oozed out over the air where it might endanger his prized public persona. But he had declared a moratorium on horseplay and silliness. Between on-air contacts, Titan was casually snubbing Rockman, the junior partner.

Titan finished the movie promo announcement, killed his mike, flipped the binder page, and declined to make eye contact with Rockman. Turning his back, he rummaged through the cart racks along the wall behind him, assembling the next block of commercial spots.

Susie Maltoon made a quizzical face when Rockman looked her way through the producer's window. She had started to light a cigarette, but dropped it in an ashtray to move toward the inner studio door at the same moment Rockman did, ambushing him just outside in the vestibule.

"What's with God's gift to women this morning?" she asked. A favorite subject of Susie's, Titan's vanity and his rumored womaniz-

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ing. "Some woman finally kick him where he needs it?"

"How should I know?" Rockman answered. He felt irritable. "The guy could drop dead and have just as much to say to me."

"Hey, cool thought. Can't you see old Strut doing the rigor mortis?" Strut. One of Susie's private nicknames for Titan, along with Mel and B. D., Mel being short for Melon Head and B. D. for Blow Dry. So far, her snide scorn hadn't gotten back to Titan, a man with more than enough clout to get her booted out the door. Rockman, too, for that matter, even though the station had been heavily promoting the Titan and Rockman Show as a duo for some time. Rockman heard Susie babbling on.

"Like, what if we took a vote on it? You suppose most people would say the guy was already a stiff?"

Rockman pinched up his boyish face. Little Susie, perpetual college student. She still had a lot to learn. Rockman felt like Methuselah talking to her, despite the small difference in their ages.

"You making the regular coffee run?" he asked.

"I'll fly, you buy," she replied. This was an offer he wasn't given a chance to refuse.

Wally Grundle fired up the soldering gun in the engineering office next door. Time to tackle that annoying portable tape recorder that had been staring at him from the back of his workbench for nearly a month.

Another fix-it job. Life at the station had become an endless parade of broken electrical connections since the day they'd put him out to pasture thirty-five years before. The live broadcast console he'd once taken such anonymous pride in running was now operated by the disc jockeys themselves, even if they didn't understand how the circuits worked or how to fix them when something went wrong. That's why they kept Wally around like the lonely washing-machine repairman.

Wally brought the disassembled tape mechanism up close to his trifocals for a better look, humming along to the Phil Collins song on the FM monitor. A sharp popping noise made him jump. It sounded like the snap of a power surge, yet somehow different. A month ago, a power surge had scrambled the transmitter's microprocessors and knocked KZAP's sister AM station off the air for an hour. This time the music continued uninterrupted. Wally checked the transmitter dials. Everything still in the safe range, and the automated routing switches on the Di-Tech 927 weren't going nuts

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like the last time. Even the new temperamental telephones were still working. Odd.

"You're listening to the K-ZAP morning zoo on ninety-six point five FM," Titan's voice reported over Wally's monitor as the song faded. "It's seven thirty-nine. Twenty-one before eight. We've got seventeen degrees and clear skies for your Monday morning rush. Coming up, more of the songs you want to hear, plus news, weather, sports, and traffic with Jerry and Myra. Stick around. Back after this."

A commercial block started. Everything seemed to be up and operational. So Wally potted down the volume on his monitor and went back to the irritating portable. Wally despised Titan. The pompous bully ordered him around like a lackey when the equipment needed troubleshooting. He pressed down hard with the soldering iron, smiling to himself as it burned right through a damaged circuit board.

Lance Baxter worked the buttons on his car stereo. His Saab 9000 darted back and forth across the freeway lanes as abruptly and unpredictably as the radio jumped around the frequency band, as he simultaneously searched for the swiftest lane and the hottest sound.

He chuckled. The other stations' traffic reports sounded canned and stale, as if they originated from a single cubbyhole in the basement of a precinct house. No distinctive whup-whup-whup in the background like Myra Meredith's cut-in. The chopper. Instant credibility. Everything up to the second.

Then Lance frowned. So why were these other crummy stations gaining on KZAP-FM's number one rating at this hour? Was the novelty of his carefully paired morning team wearing off? Another two-tenths of a point decline in the ratings book would flatten an already diminished bonus.

Lance irritably jumped over to see what his clowns were up to and heard complete silence. Fiddling with the volume control and the preset button did not change it. So he manually tuned the radio. The Saab meandered. More dead air. The signal was off during the most critical half-hour of drive time! Incredible! Was Titan screwing around with the equipment again? Honestly, broadcast legend or not, the guy deserved to be strangled sometimes. What a nut case. This was outrageous. Someone would be dancing on hot briquettes for this before the morning was out.

Lance reached for his car phone and steered the 9000 into the distress lane to zip around some poky mini-van on the right. The studio line rang and rang.

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"Answer the damn phone!" Lance shouted.

Jerry Rockman was aware of the hush, too. Reflexively, he checked his watch. No nightmare lapse on his part. Only 7:44. Still a full quarter-hour before news time.

"Titan must have jammed a cart player," he explained to a reporter colleague from KZAP's sister TV station.

"He's apparently in no rush to fix it," came the reply.

Rockman stopped editing tapes, as if the effort of listening to dead air required full concentration. Should he be chasing down the hall to check it out?

After a minute, he stood up and strolled nonchalantly in the direction of the studio. Before he could reach the door and punch the security code into the number pad, the short version of the station's call-letter jingle hit the air. It was followed immediately by a new record.

Then, over the intercom, Wally Grundle's panicky voice boomed, "Emergency in Studio B! Emergency! We need medical assistance in here!"

Susie Maltoon's eyes widened in horror. She dropped the coffee. Styrofoam cups exploded and splattered, scalding her ankles. Wally Grundle and Jerry Rockman jumped, too. Then they all danced around a minute.

"Watch it!" Wally yelled. "You want to knock us off the air?"

Coffee had splashed on the body of Tom Titan, too. He was sprawled on the studio floor and definitely not dancing.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" Susie shrieked. "What happened?" She inadvertently answered her own question as she moved forward for a better look. Her foot struck a small handgun and sent it clattering into the broadcast desk.

"Watch it! Watch it!" Wally yelled. "The damn thing could go off again!"

"Again?!"

"For pity's sake, you ninny. Can't you see Titan's been shot?"

Rockman could tell that wasn't what Susie meant. It was all too obvious the man had been shot. He lay there bleeding, a grotesque halo spreading in the carpet around his head. Something about the way Wally said the thing about the gun made Rockman wonder, too. Had Wally seen the gun go off before?

"Did he, like, shoot himself?" Susie asked.

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"How should I know," Wally snarled. "Look, instead of asking stupid questions, make yourself useful and refile these carts. Then hunt down the next set of spots while Junior here figures out how he's going to handle this on the air."

It had not occurred to Rockman that he would have to utter words about this. Not over the air. Not immediately. His newsman's instincts were numbed with shock. News was something that happened to someone else. This was too personal, too unreal. Wally was right, of course. The station was still broadcasting, the multitude still tuned in, even if the host was dead of a gunshot wound. Rockman needed to supply news and explanations and satisfy morbid curiosity within the bounds of good taste. But there were his personal feelings and the privacy of Titan's family to consider.

"Have the police been called?" Rockman asked Wally Grundle.

"First thing I did was dial nine-one-one," he said. "The place will be crawling with cops and paramedics any minute."

At the insistence of Detective Frank Johnson, live broadcast operations were moved out of the badly trampled crime scene and into a studio across the hall. It was a production facility and back-up studio used only a few hours each day. Wally tapped some buttons on the automated routing switcher in engineering, and only a small blip went out over the air.

"Where were you when this happened?" Detective Johnson asked brusquely.

"In the newsroom," Jerry Rockman replied.

"Anybody see you in there?"

Rockman was flabbergasted. He wasn't prepared to cope with the insensitivity of clumsy, ignorant questions at the moment. He was struggling with personal stress and the performance anxiety of making up a ghastly broadcast as he went along.

"Maybe a half-dozen people saw me, I'd guess." He supposed that the cop had to start someplace. The police couldn't possess the instant insider suspicions and theories that were already nibbling at Rockman's imagination. He wished he'd handled himself as forcefully as Susie Maltoon.

"Hey, do you mind?" she'd said. "We're trying to do a radio gig here."

After the detective had left, Susie asked Rockman, "Why didn't you tell that cop to run along and twiddle his billy club?"

* * *

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Rockman watched Lance Baxter tug back his monogrammed sleeve with a manicured finger and consult his Rolex. "People, if I could have your attention, please. Tick-tock, tick-tock."

The somber staff gathered in the subdued light of the conference room to grapple with practical issues raised by the murder of their star jock, Tom Titan. Grief, if any was felt, was not on the agenda drawn up by Lance Baxter. Condolences, either.

Lance pulled at his suspenders with his thumbs and said, "We are doing everything possible to assist the police with their investigation. We expect you to cooperate. I must say that it does not look good. Detective Johnson seems almost certain that Tom was murdered by someone who works in the broadcast center." Lance seemed to savor the drama of his comment before continuing. "The police are discounting the deranged-fan theory."

"What about the bag lady?" Susie demanded.

"They find the whole claim spurious," Lance replied.

"Baumgardner saw her, man," Susie insisted. An early-arriving ad salesman had noticed an unfamiliar woman in a heavy overcoat and babushka carrying a department-store shopping bag in a back corridor of the broadcast center around seven-thirty.

"Forget the bag lady," Lance said, fixing Susie with a hard stare. "Think instead, each of you, how you can account for your own movements between seven forty-one and seven forty-five this morning."

"Why should any of us kill Titan?" Susie asked.

"Good question. I can't imagine. But whoever shot Tom Titan knew the routine around here, knew the studio keypad access code, knew how to operate the perimeter security gate outside. They had to get into the building with an authorized key card or be admitted by security. Pretty difficult for this bag lady, since the guards didn't let her in. So—ah, Myra. Good you're here."

Tall, thin, and blond, with catlike green eyes and a model's high cheekbones, Myra Meredith was teased for being the farmer's granddaughter. As a pilot and traffic reporter, however, Myra had rapidly acquired big-city sophistication and flair. Standing there in her leather flight jacket and baggy trousers, holding her cap, she seemed slightly disoriented at the moment, like a 1920s aviator misplaced in time. Amelia Earhart, returned.

"What's the story?" she asked.

"We're discussing alibis," Lance said. "You can get filled in later. The police will be speaking to you. But on to radio business. Myra,

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I would like you to take over middays for a while. Bruce, you will move to afternoon drive. That frees Craig up to take mornings with Jerry until a permanent replacement can be found."

"Who does traffic?" Myra asked.

"Sorry, Myra, you do. For now. Nobody else around here knows how to fly a helicopter, do they? No. So until arrangements can be made, you'll just have to put in the extra hours. I'll find a replacement for your weekend shift."

"Thank you," Myra said.

"What about the gun, Lance?" Rockman asked. He was eager for details of the investigation. "Isn't that a lead for the police?"

"I'm told it's a twenty-five-caliber Raven, cheapest Saturday night special made. They might as well come in cereal boxes. The cops are assuming it's stolen and untraceable. There are no prints on it. Our murderer wore gloves."

Wally burst into the room.

"Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Baxter," he said, "but you better come hear this. We got Tom Titan on the air."

"You're listening to the K-ZAP morning zoo on ninety-six point five FM. It's seven thirty-nine. Twenty-one before eight. We've got seventeen degrees and clear skies for your Monday morning rush. Coming up, more of the songs you want to hear, plus news, weather, sports, and traffic with Jerry and Myra. Stick around. Back after this."

It was Tom Titan's voice, all right, sounding as fresh and alive as ever. Lance Baxter retrieved the tape from his office cart player and swiveled back toward his antique desk in a tufted leather chair. Detective Frank Johnson was looking perplexed.

"Gimme that," the detective said.

Lance handed over the cart.

"Whaddaya call this?" Johnson said.

"A cart, Detective."

"Looks like it could run on the stupid eight-track player I had in high school," Johnson said derisively, turning the blue-tinted plastic cartridge around in his hands. "There ain't much tape in there for such a big box."

Lance wanted to ask Johnson if an eight-track tape would fit into the pocket of a leisure suit. But he decided to stick with his program of gentle condescension, which had gotten him through the morning so far. Sarcasm could backfire.

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"It's the standard industry workhorse," Lance explained. "We put everything on them, sports, announcements, songs."

"Why's that?"

"Ah, well, take a close look at the construction through the clear top," Lance replied. "See? It's a continuous tape loop. No need to rewind. It comes right back to its starting position automatically. It's always cued up and ready to play again at the touch of a button. Especially handy for frequently used ID jingles, drop-ins, and such."

Johnson shook his head. Then he shook the cart. It rattled softly.

"What about this one? Where'd it come from? How does it get on the air two hours after a guy's been croaked?"

"One thing at a time, Detective," Lance said. He explained patiently about high-frequency end tones that only the equipment can hear, tones that start each successive tape in sequence so a disc jockey doesn't have to hover over the equipment and start each spot in a string of commercials or other program material. A light went on in Johnson's eyes.

"Hold on, wait. What you're saying is that this cart could have been played automatically by some piece of equipment at 7:39 this morning without anybody around to make it happen. So our boy Tom could have been dead and still on the air."

"Bravo, Detective."

Detective Johnson peered through the clear top of the cart looking for the next clue.

"If I might suggest what happened, Detective?" Lance said.

"Yeah, you do that."

"Whoever murdered Titan made that tape. They had it on them when they shot him. They inserted it into a cart player ahead of a block of commercials we know that Titan had set up. When that Phil Collins tape ended, Titan was already dead, but the end tone on the tape tripped the one with his voice on it you just heard. It made it sound as if he were still alive and broadcasting. Then the end tone on that tape tripped the commercial block, and the last spot in sequence started another song. All told, Titan could have been dead five or six minutes before anyone realized anything was wrong. Gives your killer time to escape and establish an alibi."

Johnson tapped his finger on the cart and sat silent for a moment.

"So why'd it get on the air again just now?"

Lance glanced toward Yolanda, the advertising-department employee standing silently near his office window. "Yolanda can address that question. Look at the label on the end of the cart. Number

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six seventeen? That's a spot number. Not on program tapes."

Johnson shook his head.

"You see," Yolanda said, taking over, "we number the spots to keep them all straight. The jocks play them by the numbers, following the commercial log."

"Yeah, yeah?"

"So spot six seventeen was scheduled to play just after ten this morning."

Johnson looked impatient. "So why is it this voice from the grave instead?"

"Here's the thing," Yolanda said. "Six seventeen was supposed to be a cart for a new advertiser. I went in to put the real spot in the rack this morning, but I found there was already one in there. It didn't make any sense, but I didn't try to straighten it out right then in all the confusion. Everything's been so crazy, I kinda forgot about it."

Johnson was still lost, Lance could see that.

"The killer tripped up," he said, taking over. "He put an unused spot number on there so his cart would blend in unnoticed. If the number hadn't been assigned to another advertiser, this cart would have been refiled routinely by someone and just sat in the rack with the others, untouched. Later, I suppose he planned to quietly remove it and erase it. His tracks would have been completely covered."

Johnson didn't seem pleased. In fact, he looked peeved.

"For cryin' out loud, everybody in the stinkin' place has been handling this and moving it around and doing God knows what else to a prime piece of evidence. This ain't gonna help us one bit."

Lance let out a sigh and took a long look at his ceiling.

Jerry Rockman covered the remains of his half-eaten cafeteria sandwich with a wadded paper napkin. "Whoever did it would have had to cut a lot of different carts to cover the time and temperature possibilities."

Susie Maltoon and Myra Meredith nodded.

"Someone musta been plotting for ages," Susie said. She slurped the dregs of a soda with a straw.

"Maybe," Rockman agreed. "But it could be done fairly quickly if you had access to a library of station tapes."

"Air-check!" Susie said, triumphantly.

"Exactly," Rockman said. "Tom Titan's every broadcast on reel-to-reel masters. It would take patience, of course. You'd have to

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sneak around to do it. But it could be pieced together."

"You know who's in charge of archives, don't you?" Susie said, eyes brightening. "That old fascist Wally Grundle. Hey, you don't s'pose . . . "

Rockman shook his head. "Nah." He pushed the plastic plate aside. "But all our airtight alibis are shot, you know. Except yours, Myra. After they check out the earlier time, one of us could be answering charges. I don't like it. That cop is a loose cannon. I mean, I have the knowledge and means necessary. We all do. And I had opportunity. And you know they're going to try to pin it on someone, a high-profile killing like this."

Myra's smile was strained. "You're thinking about doing something, aren't you?"

"I'm only going to have a chat with Wally about the air-check archives," Rockman said. "See what he knows. See where that leads."

"You go messing around with the archives and you could have the FCC breathing down your neck," Myra said. "They don't look kindly on anybody messing with that stuff. It's the public record. Official inquiries only. Why don't you just leave this to the police?"

"And wait till that lame-brain Johnson decides to charge me? Sorry."

"Jerry's right, Myra. I mean, who knows more about how the place operates, that donut-hole Johnson or us? Me, I'm gonna track down Baumgardner and find out about this bag lady. That'll be my assignment."

They both looked at Myra.

"Hey, what do you guys expect? I have my hands full with my new dawn-to-dusk air shift. Don't count on me."

The evening paper featured multiple stories and photos about the Tom Titan killing. "Radio Personality Murdered on the Air," one distorted headline screamed. Actually, an open mike might have revealed something. Rockman kicked off his shoes, pushed some clutter aside on his couch, and read each story thoroughly.

There was other front-page news. Rockman ignored it until the contents of one picture struck him belatedly. When he realized what he had seen, he had to turn back to it. It was not something the police would connect with the murder. It was a scene far from the KZAP studios. But its significance was obvious to Rockman. And it pointed a finger.

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* * *

From the loading dock, Jerry Rockman watched as Myra Meredith nestled the whining helicopter gently onto the parking lot asphalt. An icy wave of dust washed his way. He squinted and turned his head.

In all the months of talking to Myra up in the air, he had never seen her fly because the copter was kept at the airport. But now that the station had created a temporary helipad in the back lot to get her to her new air shift by ten, her landings were being witnessed daily by a small gathering on the back steps. You could hear the chopper's approach from a mile off.

Rockman thought Myra looked remarkably confident at the controls, bringing the awkward-looking bird down in a tight space between the power lines and transmitter-tower guy wires. She cut the engine, took off her headset, and disembarked, waving with an embarrassed smile to the small group that had gathered.

"Let's hope the novelty wears off soon," she shouted to Rockman as she approached the back steps. The others had dispersed, giggling about the chilly weather and grousing about unfinished work.

"Where'd you learn to fly those things?" he asked. The blade continued whipping up turbulence as it slowly wound to a stop.

"My dad, before he died," she said as Rockman opened the door for her. "He used to take me up and let me play with the controls. I was only eight or nine. I worshiped him. He was fearless. Flew choppers in Nam."

Myra seemed to be in a hurry. "Show prep," she explained as Rockman fell in beside her for the walk to the employee locker room. "You guys learning anything?" Myra asked.

"Well, Wally Grundle was no help. It wouldn't have been difficult to make a pirate tape off the air-check masters. The cabinet isn't locked and the engineering office is often empty. I'm sure I'll find Titan's famous last words on an air-check tape someplace, but I'm not sure what good it will do."

Myra stopped and turned her cool green eyes on him.

"I hear that Wally loathed Titan," she said. "Something personal."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean he would kill him. Frankly it baffles me why anyone would."

"He doesn't have a substantiated alibi, either."

"But neither do I," Rockman pointed out. "Neither does Susie. Do you suspect us, too?" Myra shook her head and put her thumbnail between her teeth. Then she said, "Look, I gotta get going."

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"Something bothering you?" Rockman asked, grabbing the sleeve of her flight jacket.

"Only that Wally Grundle is a man with unlimited access to the tapes. He was the first guy into the studio. And when I tried to call in my seven forty-five report, he picked up the phone after several zillion rings and told me to stuff it."

Susie Maltoon pulled her feet off Tom Titan's desk and tossed his copy of *Broadcasting* magazine down in a heap. Miniature headphones stayed plugged into her ears.

"Hey, Jerry!" she said, rather loudly. Rockman signaled with both hands about the headphones.

"You like Red Hot Chili Peppers?" she asked, offering him a listen as one might offer a toke on a joint. Rockman shook his head. "Better'n that sappy crud they play around here."

"What's the word?" Rockman asked.

"Minimal," she said, the beat from the tiny speakers chattering in her hand. "Wally Grundle thinks he heard the shot. Thought it was a power blip. Nerd thrills, you know?"

"Yeah, right. What about the paraffin tests they made everybody take?"

"Not a smudge of gunpowder to be found. Not that the bag lady was tested." Still harping on the deranged-fan idea.

"Did Baumgardner have anything to say about the mysterious intruder?"

"Funny thing. Baumgardner hasn't been around for a couple of days. One of the secretaries got a message he had to leave town on a family emergency. Nobody's seen him."

Rockman nodded thoughtfully. Something to check on later. He took a chance. "Did you see Monday night's paper?"

"All the stuff about Titan? Yeah. Tabloid city."

"No, something else. Spilled sausage."

"What?"

Rockman was still trying to figure out how to play this piece of the puzzle. "Never mind."

"Hey, my plan? Let it go now," Susie said. "Somebody did us all a favor, you know? Why look a gift horse in the mouth?"

Rockman was stunned and offended. "How can you say that after you saw him lying in his own blood?"

"Maybe we never saw him quite the same way, hey. Even dead. He was a scumbag."

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A silence lengthened. Was it possible she hated Titan so much? Enough to kill him? It didn't seem likely. Rockman had never liked Titan all that much, either. But he certainly didn't loathe him like that. He was a meal ticket. One that, unfortunately, was now used up.

"By the way, Lance-a-lot is looking for you," Susie said, picking up the magazine again. "He was in his snotty mood. Watch yourself."

Lance Baxter was sitting on his office couch beneath his numbered Salvador Dali print, his fingers making one of those sanctimonious temples he liked so much. He wasted no time coming to the point.

"What were you doing in the archives without authorization?"

Rockman wondered who blabbed. "Listening to tapes of Titan's last couple weeks of broadcasts."

"What for?"

"I thought they might shed some light on what happened." Rockman took off his glasses and rubbed the lenses with the bottom of his sweatshirt.

"Rockman, you're young. I like you. But you're impetuous. Not only will the FCC come down hard on you for what you did, but the police could charge you with evidence tampering and impeding their investigation. The station can't handle any more dubious publicity at the moment. So I'm afraid you've left me no choice."

"No choice?"

"You are suspended. You may not realize it, but you've compromised your professional integrity and even the station's license."

"C'mon, Lance," Rockman interrupted. "You think I'm that gullible? The FCC doesn't give a damn. They're not going to find any Nixon-style gaps on their precious permanent public record, or any other tampering. You're just moving me out of the way because I remind people of Tom Titan and all the ugly business that's happened, and you want to try out some new, unsullied morning team you're lining up. You can forget this smoke screen. I don't buy it."

Baxter's eyes widened.

"Frankly, smart boy, you're the one creating smoke screens with your amateur sleuthing. It wouldn't surprise me if you get charged with the murder of Tom Titan yourself, especially after I tell the police Titan had asked me to dump you from the morning team."

Rockman was incredulous. He was sure it wasn't true. Baxter was probably saying it for the benefit of two security guards who had materialized as an exit escort. Baxter had one final nail to drive,

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another smear to add to the record for his witnesses to spread. With grave sincerity, he asked, "Did you kill him?"

"No," Rockman said calmly. "But I think I know who did."

The farm was thirty-five minutes out of town. It looked neglected. Tractor implements rusted in the yard. A torn screen door at the back of the house flapped in the wind. Field stubble poked through the snow. No one answered Jerry Rockman's repeated knocks. He cupped his hands and peered through a dusty front window. Had the old man died?

Across the icy drive was a padlocked barn reeking of diesel fuel. He could see a red, hard-cap Jeep through a crack between the doors. The fenders were chalked white with road salt and the tires were streaked with mud. A stubby coil antenna sprouted on the rear window.

Rockman eased himself through an unlatched barn window for a closer inspection. He found papers strewn on the passenger seat and carry-out cups and candy wrappers crumpled on the floor. A cassette jutted out of the tape player. Rockman extracted it. Station-issue generic.

The sun hung just above the horizon as he hoisted himself back out of the barn, his labored breath puffing clouds into the frigid late-afternoon air. In less than an hour, it would be dark. Rockman returned to his car, popped in the cassette, and cranked up the volume on his tape player waiting for a sound. It startled him when it thundered to life, as if his car were transformed into a helicopter, the thwop-thwopping sound vibrating his seat.

He backed off the volume and thought a moment. His hunch was correct. Sketchy suppositions could fill in opportunity and method, but not motive. Why would she want to murder Tom Titan?

Rockman turned the volume back up. The sensation produced by the sound was exhilarating. If you closed your eyes and let it blast, you lifted off in your imagination. Myra had traveled with this tape playing in her car on the way to commit murder. It made her mobile phone reports sound airborne.

Rockman thought about the practical difficulties of shuttling a car and copter. It hadn't been easy, but Myra needed to take the chopper out as usual in case police checked her story later. Flying it here to her grandfather's remote farm in these gently rolling hills concealed noisy movements she could not risk someone witnessing.

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Myra probably monitored the police scanner on her drive to the broadcast center, preparing her traffic reports in the same way competing stations did.

Stuffed in the Jeep's locked rear compartment were likely a thrift-store overcoat, a scarf, and the gray wig she had worn as a disguise, along with a shopping bag loaded with carts of Tom Titan in an assortment of time and temperature variations. She had probably dubbed them on her weekend shift, when the building was virtually deserted. They bought her time, delaying discovery of the murder until she had fled.

A sharp rap on the window jolted Rockman out of the depths of supposition. His head swiveled toward the very real sound that had been made by the muzzle of a small, chrome-plated handgun pointed directly at his eye.

Myra Meredith's lips were moving, but Rockman could not make out the words over the recorded copter noise. He reached for the tape-player volume knob. As he did, his car window exploded in a shower of glass.

Myra was shrieking.

"I said don't move, damn you! Don't move!"

Rockman froze. An inch to the left of where his hand had been on the tape player, a jagged metal crater sprouted around the slug from Myra's revolver. His ears were ringing, but the tape deck was silent. He could hear a helicopter wheezing to a stop, apparently behind the barn, where a concrete slab had been cleared recently of snow.

"Take it easy, Myra," Rockman pleaded.

"What the hell are you doing here? Can't you leave anything alone!"

She didn't appear to want answers.

"This is so incredibly stupid! You don't leave me any choice."

Rockman was getting weary of that phrase.

"Don't move a muscle." She side-stepped around the front of his car with the gun pointed at his face. Vivaciousness had receded somewhere into the tormented depths of Myra Meredith. Madness flickered in her green eyes.

"Drive," she said, settled into the passenger seat with the gun held low. Rockman didn't ask about the plan. When they reached the asphalt two-lane road, Myra said, "Left." Away from town. Cold air swirled in through the missing window. Rockman kept the speed down.

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Myra was silent for a while. Then she asked, "Where did I screw up?"

Rockman tried to make his voice sound calm. "There was an accident near the airport interchange that closed two freeway lanes around seven-thirty that morning. A truck overturned and dumped a load of sausages. You never mentioned it. There was a picture in the paper."

Rockman thought she looked crestfallen. "I did the seven thirty-five report from the production studio across the hall. I missed it, I guess, because I had to leave the police scanner in the car."

Rockman found the banal details repulsive.

"Why did you do it, Myra?"

"You're a chump, Jerry, you know? Is that why you put yourself on this ridiculous suicide course? Just to find out why I did it?"

Rockman drove.

"A few things about your dear, departed Mr. Titan might surprise you, buddy boy. The man got his jollies out of hitting on women in cruel ways. He did unspeakable things. I avoided his traps as long as I could, but—he—the son of a—" After a halting moment, she sobbed.

Rockman glanced over. Myra was angrily wiping away tears with the back of her hand. She gave him a mind-your-own-business look and a wave of the gun that said, keep your eyes on the road. Her revelation weighed on his conscience. He had not suspected Titan of force or brutality.

Myra regained her composure.

"I called his wife, thinking I could shut him down. She was mortified, I guess. She accused me of being a tramp and hung up on me. But I could tell the message got through. That was last week. Titan escalated his harassment after that, made threats about my career. He was a vicious, dirty monster. And he did this to a lot of people. Someone had to stop him."

Without sarcasm, Rockman asked, "Wouldn't it have been simpler to swear out a complaint or file a sex-discrimination suit?"

"So he could humiliate me some more? Why would I want to suffer that? You don't know what scum he could be. He would have twisted it all around. Who would people have believed, me or him? This was the only way."

A semitrailer truck roared past, buffeting the car and deflecting Rockman's thoughts. He needed to discover her intentions. "Aren't you supposed to be on the air right now?"

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She didn't hesitate. "I'm having two-way radio troubles. They'll clear up soon. Right after I dispose of the problem you've made of yourself . . . somewhere away from my grandfather's farm."

Rockman felt his heart in his throat. He had been assuring himself that Myra would not expect to get away with murdering two men so closely tied to her professionally, that she would calm down, sense the futility. He had clearly misjudged her state of mind. She was desperate and dangerous.

"Now that Baxter has suspended you," she said, "it'll be awhile before anybody misses you. I'll tell your friend Susie that you called me and sounded very despondent and said you were leaving town for a few days to check on some sort of lead you didn't want to discuss. I'll say I didn't believe you. There will be a fuss made, but eventually everyone will get bored with the idea you're missing."

Rockman stopped listening. Over the next rise in the road he thought he saw headlights weaving back and forth over the narrow pavement in the waltz of the drunk driver. Instinctively, he touched the seat belt in his lap. Myra was shouting. Rockman tightened his grip on the wheel and tried to guess the other driver's next move. Finally, he slammed hard on the brakes and wondered for a slow-motion instant whether anyone could survive.

At the memorial service, the funereally impeccable Lance Baxter addressed the mourners.

"It's a tragic time for all of us. So much death within our radio family."

Susie Maltoon reached toward Jerry Rockman's hand, hesitated, and tugged on his sling instead. He tried to smile. The pain had subsided some in the lacerated skin, cracked ribs, and broken arm. The flesh wound in his upper thigh where the bullet passed through still ached deeply. He would never know whether Myra had meant to pull the trigger.

Rockman looked at Susie and wondered what she wasn't saying about Titan's treatment of her. He wondered how much Lance knew about Titan's harassment of women employees, and whether he had covered it up to protect his precious ratings. And he wondered all over again whether he'd done all he could to avoid the accident.

When it was over, Tom Titan's widow embraced Rockman and thanked him and cursed the memory of Myra Meredith. Then she wept once more on the shoulders of her sons. ●

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Mystery Writers of America, Inc.

Attention, All Writers

In celebration of its 50th Anniversary in 1995, and to lend support and encouragement to the writing of the mystery story, the Mystery Writers of America will be conducting two short story contests - one for professional writers and one for amateur writers - beginning March 1, 1994.

Specific rules and prizes will be announced in a future issue of this magazine, but for now MWA wants to advise all interested writers of a few advance details:

(1) There will be no entry fee.
(2) Only one story per entrant will be accepted.
(3) Lengths of stories are to be from 3500 to 7500 words.
(4) Professionals will be judged in one category, amateurs in another.
(5) The contest will run for six months, from March 1st until August 31st of 1994.
(6) The contest will be open to everyone everywhere (except for certain contest officials).

Watch for Further News of this Mystery Writers of America Golden Anniversary Short Story Contest.

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A mother of two and a former elementary school teacher, Fort Wayne, Indiana resident Judith Post now devotes most of her time to writing. Her mystery stories have appeared in Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine *and the Crossing Press anthology* Womansleuth. *In this third mystery short she presents a harrowing futuristic view of the suburbs . . .*

THE SUBURBS

by JUDITH POST

Nobody paid much attention when it was only the strays, the kids who'd been abandoned by their parents when they were past that cute stage. The folks would stop at an alley, open a car door, and the next thing the kid knew he was living in a cardboard box, digging through garbage cans for his dinner.

"It's for a worthwhile goal," the media would explain . . . when they said anything at all. Everyone else turned a blind eye, because after all, it might be their health that was improved. Scientists had to test their theories on somebody, right? And what kind of a life did a kid have scrounging in the city on its own, anyway? *Its.* A key word. Everyone stopped thinking of the kids as human. And, for the most part, that was pretty easy to do. Without parents or shelter, they quickly degenerated into a nasty, dirty, animal state. Most cats and dogs were cuter and lots nicer.

But now the lab boys were going too far. Snatching toddlers from their parents' backyards was pushing the limits. When Mrs. Sorrens called me and asked me to find her daughter, I already knew pretty much what I was up against. Grabbing kids to play with their privates or fondle their jollies had all but disappeared in our generation. All a guy had to do was bait a trap and take home some of the alley riffraff. All right, they were kids, too, I guess. But nobody thought of them like that. They were just strays. Dirty urchins who scurried around in shadows, trying to avoid attention. A guy could do whatever he wanted to them, and nobody cared.

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All of a sudden, though, nice, clean little suburban kids were disappearing from playgrounds and malls. Some bright boy at the lab must be testing something that needed more than animal responses and grunts to chart.

That's why Mrs. Sorrens had called me to find her daughter. Usually, suburbanites and city folks don't mix. The people who came up with enough cash to escape the decay of urban blight didn't like to be reminded that they'd run from problems too big to solve. Instead, they used the city as their dumping grounds. Mrs. Sorrens had only called me because no respectable firm in the suburbs wanted to get their hands dirty. This case had a grimy underbelly nobody wanted to look at.

Driving along the freeway that was the link between our two cultures, I passed boarded-up apartment buildings that had been condemned and long-forgotten. I could feel eyes watch me from the slats between the boards. I passed liquor stores with clients passed out on their front sidewalks. After the inner core of slums, I studied mile after mile of crowded condos—the honeycomb of worker bees that kept our society running. I lived in a complex exactly like these on the east side of the city. Two hundred bucks a month for a long, narrow, all-purpose room that a suburban landlord grandiosely called a "condo."

As I left the city, I saw grass for the first time. Small yards expanded into rolling lawns. Houses grew from tiny ranch-style homes to two-story, sprawling Tudors. No smog. No stench. No poverty. Miles from city squares, but worlds apart.

Mr. and Mrs. Sorrens lived in one of those planned communities that existed only for the wealthy. Fancy cars. Big houses. Pampered people.

"Okay, tell me what happened," I coached Mrs. Sorrens as she led me past the foyer of her house into a monstrous living room. The place was decorated in elaborate Victorian. Lots of nicknacks. Crushed-velvet drapes. Stiff, fancy sofas and chairs. Not the type of place I could imagine a little kid hanging out.

"I kept Sonya on a strict schedule," Mrs. Sorrens explained. "For her own good, you understand. She's almost four. It's time she learned some discipline. So I woke her every morning at six-thirty, and we did the usual routine: breakfast, getting dressed, and straightening her room. I never accepted less than satisfactory work.

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Our neighborhood association is strict about that. Any unruly children, and the parents are expected to move."

I'd heard about the new regulations in the suburbs, but I'd never really paid attention to them. I thought about my growing-up days, when "boys could be boys" and girls could pout and cry. Those days were over, I guessed.

"Anyway, after Sonya's morning lessons . . . "

"Lessons?" I inquired. The kid wasn't even four.

"Our neighborhood association expects a child to show talent at an early age. Sonya had a distinct gift for music. She enjoyed her piano lessons, on the whole."

I nodded. I supposed this was inevitable. First, the parents fought to get their kids into the best nursery schools. Now, they trained them early to help them compete for the choicest spots.

"Anyway, from one to three in the afternoon was Sonya's free time. Most days, she wanted to go outdoors." Mrs. Sorrens made a face. "Of course, she insisted on coming in dirty most of the time, so we'd have to repeat her bath, but"—a small smile—"kids will be kids."

If that's what you call it. I looked up from my notepad. "Then you put Sonya outside every day at the same time?"

"The neighborhood association encourages regimen."

I let that slide. "Tell me, Mrs. Sorrens, do you have any other children?"

She glanced away, refusing to meet my eyes. "Well, we'd had a couple before we had Sonya, but they were both unsuitable."

Abortions were a thing of the past. Today, women had their children, then disposed of them if they were unsatisfactory. It hadn't started that way, of course. At first, only poor, unwed mothers ditched their offspring in the gutters. But then money got a little tighter, and soon cast-off kids were running around in packs all over the place. Next, it became a matter of convenience.

"How old would they be now?" I tried to find a pattern, to see if maybe the rash of kidnappings had something to do with siblings—those raised in the alleys compared to those kept and cared for.

"The boy would be eight or nine, if he survived. I'd be surprised if he did. He was always sickly. The girl would be six or seven."

"But you kept your next girl?" I asked, somewhat surprised. Often parents disposed of whatever sex they didn't prefer. Sure, they meant to give it a fair try, to hold the little tyke in their arms and

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try to bond. But if it didn't work—who kept track anymore?

"She was a colicky, temperamental thing. Not very attractive."

The true answer. The kid was no rosy little cutey. Parents could afford to be choosey these days. Still, nobody bragged about dumping their offspring. People just didn't talk about it. This must be embarrassing for Mrs. Sorrens, sitting in her perfect house with her perfect regimen in her prosperous neighborhood. I hoped she squirmed plenty. This whole trend rubbed me wrong. I mean, I'm not exactly a prince myself. What if my mother had expected the fairy-tale kid?

"And Sonya?" I asked.

Mrs. Sorrens beamed. "She was everything we'd ever dreamed of. Golden curls. Big blue eyes. A sweet, docile disposition."

I remembered little girls like that. I'd usually picked on them in school. But now they'd become the keepers. Kids like me were throwaways.

"Did you see anyone new or unusual in the neighborhood yesterday?"

She shook her head. "Sonya was in the yard when the kids came home from school. The next time I looked, she was gone."

"There's been kind of a rash of kids being snatched lately, hasn't there?" I asked.

"Almost an epidemic."

"And you still let your daughter outside by herself?"

"The neighborhood association strongly believes in developing a child's sense of self-reliance," Mrs. Sorrens replied hotly. "And our dog was with her. He always barks when someone new comes around."

I glanced around the house. "I didn't hear a dog bark when I came in."

Mrs. Sorrens's face grew pinched. "That's because he's dead. Whoever took Sonya poisoned him."

I stopped writing and stared out the big picture window facing the street. Kids were getting off a school bus and walking toward their houses. Older kids. Something was gnawing at me. Why would the lab boys take a chance of shutting down a prosperous operation by forcing people to think about what they did behind closed doors? And would some lab psycho really poison a family dog to snatch a child from the suburbs?

"Has anyone new been to your house lately?" I asked. "Anyone at all?"

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She began to shake her head, then stopped. "There was a child from school, taking pledges for a fund drive."

"You're sure he was from your neighborhood school?"

"He was wearing the blue-plaid uniform." She frowned. "I must admit he put me off a little, though. I haven't seen such an unappealing child at any of our school functions. And his manners left quite a lot to be desired."

"Had many parents signed the pledge sheet?"

She frowned again. "No, the boy must not have made too much of an effort. He'd visited the Willises on the other side of the addition, but not many people in between."

I pushed myself to my feet. "You wouldn't happen to have the Willis's address, would you?"

"Why? Is it important?"

"It might be."

When she'd given it to me, I drove to the other side of the neighborhood. Every lawn was immaculately manicured. Every house was a small mansion. Nothing was out of place. The suburbs, I thought. No wonder I rarely wandered outside of the city. Sure, we had the stray problem. And buildings that had seen better days. But I'd rather see a cockroach once in a while than live like this.

Mrs. Willis opened her front door and invited me inside. Stupid, I thought, before I remembered that crime was practically extinct in this utopia of the monied. Stepping into the foyer, I almost experienced déjà vu. A huge living room. Professional decor. Everything spotless and expensive.

"Do you happen to remember if a young boy visited you recently, asking you to sign a pledge for his school?" I asked, as Mrs. Willis carried a silver serving tray with tea and cookies into the room.

"Why, yes, he came on a Tuesday night. He was wearing the school uniform, so we'd be able to place him."

"Did you happen to read the form you signed?" I asked.

She frowned. "Why, of course, it was a fund drive for the elementary school."

"What does the school need money for?" I asked.

She sipped her tea, considering. "I'm not sure the form said."

"Did it have a principal's name on it, or any other official's?"

"Now that you mention it, I don't believe it did." She looked at me, mildly concerned. "Why?"

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"I'm just following through on a hunch," I told her, "but if I were you, I'd keep your child inside for a few days. The Sorrenses lost their daughter out of their own backyard."

For the first time, she looked shaken. "But what will my neighbors think? If I keep Twyla indoors, I mean? Our association stresses regimen, you know."

I took a deep breath. "Look, lady, if someone grabs your kid, it won't matter what they think, will it?"

Her eyes went wide. Biting her bottom lip, she said, "What if you're wrong?"

"What if I'm right?" I retorted and stalked toward the door.

"You're as rude as that young boy was," she snapped. "He had no manners either. I even considered reporting him to our Standards Committee."

Standards Committee. That figured. I'd had my fill of parents in the 'burbs. My next stop would be the elementary school. I wondered what the teachers were like out here.

I parked in a visitor's space and watched a group of brownies follow their leaders to some picnic tables on the playground. The little girls waited their turn as the leader instructed them where to sit. They patiently waited as she handed out their paper and paints for a craft lesson. There was no pushing or shoving. No talking back.

A shivery tingle traveled down my spine as I entered the building. There were no scuff marks on the floor. No wads of paper. No spit-out gum. I knocked on the door to the office, and a secretary motioned me inside.

"I was wondering if I could see the principal," I said.

I was shown into the inner sanctum of the school. A fortyish woman in a cream-colored silk suit rose from behind her desk and extended a hand. Her makeup was flawless. Every hair in place.

"May I help you?" she asked. Her smile was polite and businesslike.

I showed her my ID and said, "I've been hired by the Sorrenses. Their daughter Sonya was snatched from their backyard yesterday."

"Yes, I know. Our school likes to keep track of anything that might affect the well-being of our children," she told me.

"Then can you tell me this? A young boy wearing one of your school uniforms visited their house, asking for pledges for a fund drive—"

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Before I could finish, she said, "That's impossible. Our school doesn't believe in sending children door to door."

"Then there is no pledge drive?" I persisted.

"Of course not."

"Is it possible the boy was one of your students trying to make a few extra bucks?"

The idea clearly scandalized her, but she shook her head. "Our students would never consider something as tawdry as that, but one of our boys did have an ugly incident a few weeks ago. He went into the showers after soccer practice, and when he came out, his school uniform was missing."

"That's an ugly incident?"

"No one steals at our school," she informed me. "No one. The old days—" She eyed me coldly, as if I were the worst example of what she was about to say. "—of children showing disrespect to their elders, being unmotivated and undisciplined, are a thing of the past. Now, we've learned how to make children deliver what we expect. At this school, our expectations are very, very high."

I stood. "Thank you for your time."

She paused significantly. "Did the Sorrenses hire you to find little Sonya and return her to them?" she asked.

"Yes."

She chose her words carefully. "I hope you've informed them that if you find her, she might not be the wonderful little girl she was."

I swallowed a cold, hard lump in my throat as I left the building. If little Sonya was tarnished in any way, would her parents still want her?

The next afternoon, I drove to the Willises' house and parked a block down the street. Just as I expected, little Twyla was playing in the fenced-in backyard. A large golden retriever stood guard over her. A great idea, except that golden retrievers are big, friendly pooches. Again, as I expected, a few minutes after the school bus emptied its occupants at the corner, a boy dressed in a blue-plaid uniform walked from the woods that separated the housing addition from the school. He could have been walking home after seeing a teacher, or he could have been hiding from view, waiting for the other kids to provide him with cover.

He carried a lunch box, and as he neared the Willises' fence, he opened it, offering part of his sandwich to the retriever. After a few bites, the dog staggered toward the house and slumped on the back

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steps. Then the boy said, "Hey, Twyla, what's wrong with your dog?"

The little girl looked at him in confusion.

"Come here and I'll give you some cake for your pet. Maybe he's sick or hungry."

When Twyla came to the fence, the boy said, "I bet your mom's gonna be real mad if she thinks you made the dog sick. If you come with me, I have a friend who knows a lot about animals. Maybe he can tell us how to make your dog feel better."

Twyla raised her arms in the air and let herself be lifted over the fence. The boy carried her back toward the woods.

I waited to start my car and follow them. I didn't want the boy to know I was onto him. Before they reached the woods, he ducked into a van, and the driver pulled away from the curb. I followed the van to the lab at the edge of the city. I took the van's license number while I waited for the boy to carry Twyla into the lab. Then I followed him.

I called the cops from the receptionist's desk. They could pick up the van if they hurried. Then I entered the office where the boy was selling Twyla to a lab type in a white frock.

Grabbing the boy's arm, I said, "This little girl's not a stray. You have to know that from the way she looks." The technician was checking Twyla's name on a chart he had. "Do you mind?" I scanned the list of names. Sonya Sorrens was on it. "None of these kids are strays. They've all been snatched from their backyards, and I'd say you guys have a lot of explaining to do."

"That's impossible." The technician pointed to the top of the sheet. In capital letters, it announced, "Found Defective—"

"He scammed you," I said. "And you wouldn't have to be too bright to figure that out. Probably made a few bucks for himself, right?" I turned to study the kid.

His eyes burned with hatred. He was tall and thin, with a spotty complexion. I guessed him to be nine or ten. But I'd never seen a kid so young look so hateful.

"You're in big trouble, kid," I told him. "What you did was pretty dirty."

"Why is it any worse than what they did to me?" he hissed.

"They?"

"My parents. I wasn't as cute as Sonya, was I? So does that make it okay to take me out into the country and dump me in the woods? Maybe they thought they were doing me a favor, because I wouldn't have to worry about the lab men in the city. But in the country the

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kids run in packs. They fight for every inch of territory to find food."

I didn't answer him. I couldn't.

The lab man stared. "You mean, you're a stray?"

The boy glared. "I'm not what you expected, huh? We're not the dumb, dirty beasts you thought we'd be."

"You can talk," the man said. "You have language."

"We have more than that," the boy spat. "We have leaders. We have plans. And you're gonna be sorry you ever made us hurt."

I envisioned an army of ruffian guerrillas, driving forth in vans to steal younger, adored brothers and sisters, to make them suffer as they had suffered.

"You're punishing the wrong people, you know," I said.

"What do you know?" the kid argued.

"More than I want to."

The lab man was studying the boy too closely, a gleam shining in his eyes. Then I did a careless thing. My hand slipped, and the boy broke free.

"Stop him!" the lab man cried.

But the receptionist was no match for the kid. He was past her and out the door before she could round her desk. The last I saw of him, he was jumping into the van as it squealed from the curb.

When the cops arrived, the lab men were trying to retrieve the children whose names were on the list. Unfortunately, none of them was perfect anymore.

I put Sonya Sorrens in my car and began to drive to the suburbs. I tried not to glance at the child. Every time I did, my heart hurt. When I walked her to the door and saw her parents react to her, I knew the girl was in big trouble.

"Look," I heard myself say—and I couldn't believe the words were coming from my mouth, "if you don't want her, I do."

Mr. Sorrens looked at me. "Give us a minute, will you?"

They shut the door on us. We stood on the front step for a good five minutes. When they returned, they had a suitcase packed with all of Sonya's clothes. Wordlessly, they handed it to me.

As I drove back to the city, I had to make myself go the speed limit. I could hardly wait to leave the suburbs. My mind kept replaying scenes from the last few days. I tried to figure a way that I could find the boy. My apartment wasn't very big. And it was cluttered with all kinds of junk. But it was heaven after visiting the 'burbs. I thought the boy might be ready for a slice of paradise. ●

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a *NEW* short story by

STEPHEN WASYLYK

Stephen Wasylyk is one of those rare authors who manages to endow his characters with small-town kindness and humanity even when his tale is set on the harshest of urban streets. He is the author of several other recent stories for EQMM . . .

MATERNAL INSTINCT

by STEPHEN WASYLYK

Peering into shop windows as he ambled down the street, Mace Crandall turned into the thrift shop. Why, he had no idea. Certainly he was far above the socioeconomic market segment—words beloved by those engaged in the profession of separating people from their money—for which thrift shops were created. But then his father had often said through the years, loudly and well within his hearing, that Mace was an idiot who seldom had an idea of why he did many of the things he did.

A stroll through the aisles brought him face-to-face with a rack of umbrellas ranging from a dainty, lacy pink parasol resurrected from a genteel attic, to a huge, garish golf umbrella that was certain to attract any lightning bolt in the vicinity.

At the end of the rack were several canes and walking sticks.

Atop one, a flattened wolf's head bared fangs at him in a malevolent grin. He lifted it delicately between thumb and forefinger as though expecting to be bitten.

The silvery hardwood had grown in a convoluted, squashed sort of a question mark, transformed by a creative carver into the wolf's head and fitted to a darker, almost purple ferrule.

Below the head one brass band concealed the seam; there was another about two inches below it.

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Heavy. Hefting it, he considered that he had absolutely no use for a walking stick. Five minutes later he walked out with it under his arm.

His father would have predicted it. You have a talent for wasting money, he'd often said. It's the only talent you have.

Ada Rayburn turned from her cab at the apartment house entrance in time to see him walking up the street with the stick tucked under his arm. Looked a little like Fred Astaire strolling up the avenue. Give him a top hat, and he'd break into a tap dance. She'd always liked Fred Astaire. Not too fond of Ginger Rogers, though. Probably because Ginger was lithe and well shaped; while in her youth, Ada was tall, stout, and as light on her feet as a cement mixer. Still the same, but with gray hair added.

She had once met his mother. A colorless type with a perpetual vacant smile. And knew his father, which explained his mother. Living with the elder Crandall for thirty years was the equivalent of a self-inflicted lobotomy. Crandall's expertise was not in handling people, but money. Not cash that could be counted, stacked, banded, or hidden under a mattress, but the kind generated by a mysterious computer somewhere which absorbed, digested, and spewed forth ever increasing numbers on reams of paper which gave people the illusion they were acquiring wealth.

Ada, however, knew wealth when she saw it. She'd been married to a man skilled at marketing and turning a profit, but at a loss when it came to investing the profits after he made them. To Ada, though, the mysteries and nuances of the financial markets were an open book. Indeed, the eager young brokers constantly calling and hoping to place her feet on the path to greater, no-risk returns had no idea they were speaking to a sleeping giant. Only a few friends knew she wasn't a mere tenant, but owned the building. Along with three others. Plus enough precious metals to finance the budget of a third-world nation, and for a little liquidity, enough government securities to underwrite a social program or two. Ada had no intention of ever waking in the morning to find that a golf-playing, highly overpaid, power-brokering CEO had made so many stupid mistakes, the share price of her stock had been halved overnight.

"Good evening, Mr. Crandall," she said.

He nodded. "Mrs. Rayburn."

She indicated the stick with her chin. "Anticipate needing a little assistance while walking?"

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He held up the wolf's head. "Just an interesting piece of carving found in a thrift shop, Mrs. Rayburn."

"Looks like Julian after a bad day, rest his soul, but I do believe his fangs were a little longer."

They rode up in the elevator together, Mace leaving at the seventeenth floor, Ada continuing to the penthouse, and Ada, who knew more about her tenants than any of them dreamed, knew he didn't pay for his apartment, his father signed the checks, which irritated her.

A mother herself several times over, she had sent her sons off when they reached their maturity with a pat on the head. "Go, be a success or a failure, a bum or a crook. Whatever you like, as long as it makes you happy. But you get no money from me until I die, and maybe not even then, because I may spend it or give it away. Just send me a card on Mother's Day or you're out of the will."

Would that Mace's mother had done the same, but the Crandalls were a patriarchal family, rather than a matriarchal one. The father determined where his sons went and what they did from the moment they left their diapers behind. And where else would they go and what would they do but attend all the proper schools and then join the family business, which had revolved around money for four generations? Not that it didn't work sometimes. If Papa Crandall was Financial Genius No. 1, then Mace's older brother was Financial Genius No. 2, thereby making him preferred stock in his father's eyes. But with Mace it hadn't worked at all. His filial status was somewhat lower than a junk bond. Somehow the genes had been mixed up. Perhaps because he'd been forced to attend Harvard, which had been known to screw up anyone's genes. But then, disreputable genes had a way of appearing now and then without the benefit of a Harvard education, no matter how well trained the youth.

Something Mace's father failed to take into account. Watching Mace grow up, he'd often glanced suspiciously at the gardener. He should have looked closely at the family tree.

Hidden from view and never discussed were certain ancestors: a cobbler, a farmer, a minister, even a cabdriver, to name a few—occupations certainly not designed to ensure one left the world with more money than when one entered. Why else was a Crandall born?

Wishing to please his father as always, Mace allowed himself to be crammed into a pinstriped suit, a striped shirt, and a flowered tie. If he had any talent at all for the financial world, it was selling

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when he should buy and buying when he should sell, thereby blending right in with most of the others in the financial community. They, however, didn't have their errors pointed out to them daily with chilling paternal contempt.

A very unhappy man, thought Ada. She could see it in his eyes.

She also saw something else when his father's name came up. No one could fool a mother.

Like an animal confined in a pen too small and chastised not for doing wrong, but for not understanding—hungering for freedom but not knowing how to escape—he hated his father.

Mace's first step after acquiring anything previously owned was to take it apart and clean it thoroughly.

Seated at the kitchen table, he examined the stick. The two brass bands puzzled him. Since the wolf's head and the shaft were of different materials, the upper one obviously concealed the seam. Why another only two inches below?

He picked up the cane and began twisting.

A half hour later he had three pieces on the table; the wolf's head, a two-inch piece of metal painted to match the wood of the ferrule, and the ferrule itself. Very innocent, all three, separated like that.

But combined, they did not form an equally innocent cane.

What they formed was a gun. The ferrule contained the barrel inside the wood shaft, the two-inch piece the firing pin and cocking mechanism. A slight twist of the wolf's head cocked it, a reverse twist fired it.

He breathed deeply.

No question at all. He now owned a very precisely designed weapon, crafted and assembled by a superb craftsman.

Sword blades concealed in canes and walking sticks had been around for centuries, but those had been for defensive purposes for gentlemen set upon by thieves, and still existed as one answer to muggers.

For all he knew, there were even other cane guns out there created for the same defensive reasons.

But this was no defensive weapon. The caliber of the shell that would drop into the shaft was too small—a rimfire .22, he guessed—and even though it might well have been something special, it would still not be heavy enough to stop an attacker unless it found a vital spot like the head or heart. And the cane was designed for one shot and one shot only.

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Not created in some back-alley workshop. A weapon designed for sophisticated murder, like the poisoned needle in the tip of a innocuous cane or umbrella that brought instant death.

How in the hell had it landed in a thrift shop alongside a slightly faded golf umbrella?

Had it ever been used? Who knew?

Scenarios ran through his mind, all taking place in the blink of an eye, and always with the victim collapsing while a shadowy figure strode away, casually swinging a wolf's head walking stick.

He reassembled it and held it tightly in both hands.

The wolf's head grinned up at him. A thought, lurking for many years, slid boldly into view as if it had been waiting for the proper time and place to come out into the open.

If it works, Mace—

No ammunition in the apartment, of course, and he certainly didn't want to go on record as buying any in a gun shop. But two hundred miles away in a mountain retreat purchased by his father as an investment and seldom used, there were guns and ammunition, including a bolt action .22 he'd used for plinking as a boy. And if he remembered correctly, several boxes of both high-velocity shorts and longs.

Not needing one in the city, he had no car. What he did have was a gold card, that open sesame to all of life's pleasures and conveniences.

Darkness, velvety here in the mountains under a cloud cover that promised rain, enveloped him as he walked down the sloping lawn at the rear of the cabin to the lake. He listened for a moment to the small slapping sounds of wavelets pushed by the rising wind before pointing the cane at the unseen water and slowly twisting the wolf's head.

The small jerk, *spat,* and wink of flame took him by surprise.

Twenty-two caliber short. He'd been hesitant to trust the breech to resist the pressures of anything more powerful. It would be enough.

An hour later, he was on his way back to the city in the rental, the stick on the seat beside him, cleaned and holding one shell. All he'd need, but he was a careful man. Two more were in his shirt pocket. He now knew how to hold it, how to turn the wolf's head as though taking up slack on a trigger, and when it would fire.

* * *

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Ada didn't particularly like the opera, but it amused her to see an overweight diva lusted after by both a baritone and tenor. She should be so lucky. She'd also resolved never to become like many of her elderly tenants, to whom Saturday night out meant dressing in their best and sitting in the lobby; some because they were too infirm to go any farther, others because they feared to step outside.

The bearded, turbaned cabbie taking her home hadn't planned his route very well, turning down a one-way street that would necessitate a journey around the block to arrive at the entrance to the apartment house. Never mind. It wouldn't be the first time she'd settled for the general vicinity of her destination.

She stopped him at the corner, paid him, and started toward the brightly lighted entrance some thirty yards away; a tall, heavy woman in what she called her opera dress—neither formal nor informal—no jewelry except her watch, clutching her small purse in both hands.

The two of them pranced toward her. One tall and lean, the other shorter and heavier. She drew herself up. Intimidation was part of the game and she was as good at it as anyone.

They weren't intimidated. The heavier one stepped into her path. The tall one moved to her curb side, raised both hands suddenly, and pushed her hard toward the darkened windows of a dress shop.

Off balance, she clutched her purse as the short one snatched at it.

She clung to it, glaring at him, conscious of the rank odor of their perspiration, dimly aware of furiously muttered invective. The tall one slammed her against the window. She heard a soft click and caught the glint out of the corner of her eye before she felt the sharp sting along her forearm. She screamed, wrenched the purse free, whirled, and smashed it across the face of the knife wielder. He recoiled, crouched, and sidled forward, teeth bared, the knife now low and aimed up at her midriff, enough light to see the violence in his eyes. She screamed again, knowing it was now beyond purse snatching.

The knife man's head suddenly twitched. Eyes wide, he stared at her accusingly. His arms dropped. Like a boxer hit with a knockout blow, he staggered before rubbery legs gave way.

Leaning weakly against the building, she gasped air into frozen lungs, dimly aware the other was a fleeing shadow turning the corner and gone.

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Someone lifted her bleeding arm. She looked up to see Mace, wearing a short-sleeve shirt and jeans. He examined the long gash, took something out of his shirt pocket, slipped it into his jeans, stripped off the shirt, popping the buttons in the process, and wrapped it tightly around her arm.

"Let's go," he said softly.

He led her toward the building lobby, stopping for a moment to pick up that walking stick of his.

He went with her to the emergency room. Not too many stitches in the arm. She'd have a scar, the doctor said. Ada, being Ada, and not the type to suffer lasting mental trauma, had recovered enough to tell him she was beyond the age where a scar mattered and that a small one on the arm was preferable to a huge one on her stomach, and that during her lifetime she'd injured herself worse through her own stupidity.

A pleasant-faced detective named Ruiz said she could chalk this one up to the same cause. She should have given up the purse.

Remembering the ice cubes forming in her stomach as the man advanced with the knife, Ada agreed. She still had no idea why she was alive.

He was shot in the head, said the detective.

Ada stared at him. "Shot? Who shot him?"

"That's what we'd like to know." He turned to Mace. "Did you see anything, Mr. Crandall?"

"Not really," said Mace. "I heard Mrs. Rayburn scream, saw the three of them, saw the one man holding a knife, and ran to help."

"More than many people would have done, considering the knife. Some training in self-defense?"

"No, but I happened to have a walking stick with me."

"Ah. Carry it when you go out at night?"

"I will from now on. But I didn't need it. By the time I got there, one man was on the ground and the other gone."

"Did you see a gun or a muzzle flash or hear a report?"

"No, but I really wasn't paying that much attention. I was looking at Mrs. Rayburn and the knife. She was backed against the wall and I had no idea of how badly she was injured. I saw the man fall. The other one, the one who ran, his back was to me. That's about all I can recall."

"And neither of you saw anyone else around?"

Ada sniffed. Mace shook his head.

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Ruiz nodded. "I suppose he's our candidate then, although why he'd shoot his friend, I have no idea."

"Maybe he was trying to stop him," said Mace.

"You may have something there. It would explain the weapon, I suppose."

"Why should that have to be explained?" asked Ada.

"The wound indicates the man was shot with a twenty-two. People who carry guns prefer something with more stopping power. But he might have figured a twenty-two would deter the guy without killing him. Unfortunately his aim was too high. Sure you can't add anything to his description?"

"The light was behind him," said Ada.

"Well, I think we'll find they hung out together. Naturally, if either of you think of anything more, I'd appreciate a call."

He started to walk out, paused, and turned. "About that walking stick, Mr. Crandall. I hope you never have to depend on it, but keep one thing in mind. Many of those people out there are very athletic and very quick, which makes them very capable of taking it away from you and beating you to death with it."

"Do you suppose he was trying to tell you something?" asked Ada.

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Mace. "People are always trying to tell me something."

Ada could have sworn his tone said he was getting tired of it.

He visited her twice to see how she was doing, bringing flowers the first time, something no one had done for thirty years.

He'd always impressed her as very pleasant and not very definite; one of those passive people thrived on by rude waitresses, waiters, clerks, cabbies, and others filled with their own importance; smiling when insulted or pushed aside.

Different now. Thinner perhaps, shadows under his eyes, far more incisive; the second time actually ordering her to leave a cab only at the building entrance, although he did it abstractedly, as if he had something else on his mind.

The experience had reminded her that life held no guarantees, among them that she would die peacefully in bed. No doubt that if the man with the knife hadn't been shot, she'd be resting under a headstone alongside Julian. If Ruiz ever found the other man, she should give him a reward.

Yet the whole thing bothered her. If the man had a gun, why hadn't he showed it to her, instead of simply grabbing at the purse?

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Faced with a gun, no matter how small, she'd have thrust it at him. Nothing worth much in it, anyway. When he'd grabbed it, holding on was simply a reaction, done without thought. Hitting the second man with it was another reaction, to the sting of the knife cut, like slapping at a mosquito.

And, though Ruiz hadn't brought it up, if the second man had fired a gun, surely she'd have known it. He hadn't been more than three feet from her. She'd been too confused at the time to think of that. She was sure Ruiz had, however, and hadn't followed through because he'd more important things to do than find someone who shot a man a split second before he disemboweled an elderly woman.

But if not the second man, then who?

The only other person there had been Mace Crandall, but if he'd had a gun, where did it go? He'd wrapped his shirt around her arm, his jeans were too tight to conceal one, and the police had searched the street.

The only thing Mace had was that walking stick.

Mace had probably been more shocked than Ada when the man collapsed. He'd seen the three, realized what was happening, and sprinted, intending to use the stick as a club, but the knife had flashed and he'd known he'd be too late. Designed to be used within inches, the stick was no rifle capable of being aimed. In desperation, he'd simply pointed it and twisted the wolf's head, hoping he didn't hit Ada.

Sheer chance the man was dead.

He regretted that, but the image of the alternative—Ada with her hands pressed to her midriff and covered with blood—wiped out any guilt.

The incident made one paragraph in the paper under the heading "Mugger's Bullet Finds Wrong Victim," Ada's name the only one mentioned.

None of which did anything to change the plan formulating in his mind. Seeing how easily the stick could be used without arousing suspicion simply reinforced it, the wolf's head grinning at him as if to say, *I told you so.*

Hearing Ada holding a conversation with her dead husband would convince anyone that widowhood had bought her a seat on the Insane Express. In reality, Julian was still so alive in her thoughts, he might as well be in the next room, and forty years of togetherness

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made holding up both ends of the conversation easy, particularly since she'd always known what he'd say anyway.

Besides, she would have asked, who else can I talk to?

Julian, you know what happened. After thinking about it, I have to say that I think Mace Crandall killed that man with a cane that shoots bullets. Does that sound crazy?

Ada, darling, I told you a thousand times, the whole world is crazy and getting crazier. In some ways, I'm glad I'm out of it. A cane that shoots bullets? If you told me a little blue man rose out of your cheesecake and sang "Yankee Doodle," I wouldn't blink an eye. The question is, why does he have such a cane? Is it to call himself Cane Man and prowl the city rescuing attractive elderly widows from murderous purse snatchers? This obviously is not a cane for taking a jazzy stroll down the avenue, Ada.

I know that. It's a cane for killing, Julian. He used it to save me, but now I'm very worried. He walks like a man with a purpose, as though now that he's seen how easy it is, he has other plans.

Other plans? Like killing someone else?

I could be wrong, but I'm thinking of his father. A very bad relationship there.

Could he do such a terrible thing?

Even the nicest people are capable of it. It's called temporary insanity. Maybe it's none of my business—

Very true. You may be playing Ada the mother. Your children and grandchildren live too far away to be harassed, so you've adopted this young man as a project. He may not be worth it. Get a second opinion. Talk to Bernard.

She touched away a tear with a fingertip. *Thank you, Julian.*

Ruiz was happy that the nice old woman had survived more or less intact, and he didn't care about the man who'd been shot. It was the situation and the obvious answer that intrigued him. Well, obvious to him, but only because he read a lot and had come across something—hell, he really didn't want to know for certain because that would lead to all sorts of work and difficulties, culminating in headlines like *Cane Killer Trial Opens*. Politically minded DAs knew a publicity grabber when they saw one.

Crandall had done only what he had to do. The danger was that he might do it again, and Ruiz couldn't afford to look bad if a similar situation popped up. He had to prevent that possibility by removing the cause—without getting involved.

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He pondered over several solutions until he realized that the object in question was not readily available in gun shops. In fact, there were very few sources at all, and it was highly likely they might be far more embarrassed than he at its use by an ordinary citizen.

He punched in a number on his phone. The man who answered was a boyhood friend who wore a very different type of badge.

"Hector," said Ruiz, "on the desk before me is the kind of case from which legends grow. A man is shot dead, but there is no gun anywhere in the vicinity."

"Why bother me? Call yourself Agatha and write a novel."

"I called you because you work at the only place in the world where this question won't be greeted by hysterical laughter."

"Don't be too sure. What's the question?"

"Might you people be missing a twenty-two caliber cane?"

Hector didn't laugh at all.

During sleepless, pacing nights, Mace finally reached the obvious conclusion—the simplest plan was best. At nine in the evening, there would be virtually no traffic in the parking garage. Daily parkers would be gone except for one or two in the monthly rental slots on the ground floor who consistently worked late. Late diners and bar crawlers would have refilled the first few levels. If a car should enter, it wouldn't pause on its way upward. Since he anticipated no one leaving, the attendant would probably be half asleep.

His imagined scenario had a dreamlike quality; perhaps because it had been born of deeply imbedded feelings of resentment nurtured by boyhood tears. No identifiable shapes except for the one directly before him, no sound, not even when he twisted the wolf's head, the smug satisfaction as he walked down the street afterward, jauntily swinging the cane.

Indeed, there had been a dreamlike quality to everything after he'd realized the opportunity that had come with the cane.

The man was small, with a half-bald head, big ears, and a triangular face with sagging skin and pouches below the eyes; an ugly man really, but the ugliness was forgotten when the depthless eyes settled, probed, and evaluated. Not a man to trifle with, lie to, or offend. Not all powerful men are six feet tall and handsome.

"So," he said to Ada, "you asked me to find out about Mace Crandall." He dabbed his lips with his napkin. "A man in a rowboat following a very large yacht, Ada. He would like to be on board, but

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every time he comes near, he is chased away. This is not a good thing, dear, because it can make him hate the people on board."

"I was right, then," said Ada gloomily.

"Why are you concerned about this man?"

"He saved my life. And I'm afraid he intends to sink the yacht."

"Aha," said the man. "That would indeed be a waste. From what I am told, he is quite capable of owning his own yacht some day, but not in the field he is in. He was not allowed to learn, nor did anyone tell him, that his talents lie elsewhere. The consensus is that no one would trust him to invest a million dollars, but would have no hesitation in handing him a million-dollar concern that was sputtering along. He'd take it apart, clean the gears, and have it running smoothly in a year. But he'll be lost unless a psychiatrist takes a few years to straighten him out." His eyes twinkled. "Or a mother a week or two."

"Easier said than done, Bernard."

"Perhaps not. Incentive would make an excellent outboard motor for that rowboat. I know of a small concern that should be doing much better than it is. It can be purchased for a very reasonable sum. I'd be willing to take the gamble if you are."

"Draw up the papers and hope we're in time," said Ada.

The alibi, thought Mace, should be sufficient. A dimly lighted bar a block from the parking garage with a loud mix of bodies drifting up to the bar and in and out so that while no one could swear he hadn't left, no one could swear that he had.

He took a deep breath, caressed the cane, and entered a cab just as two men, both well dressed in dark suits, clean shaven with hair trimmed close, approached. They noted the cane in his hand, looked at each other, and sprinted for the sedan they had parked up the street, screeching out into traffic to follow.

Ada, returning from a conference with Bernard, took in this odd, Hollywood-type tableau, stepped back into her cab, and said, "Follow that car, and if I hear one wisecrack, even in Urdu, it's goodbye tip."

Mace's cab deposited him at the bar, the narrow street leaving no room for parking, so that one of the men left the sedan while the other drove off just as Ada arrived.

She followed them both inside, watching as Mace ordered a drink, the man hanging back, waiting for his partner to arrive. She glanced around. Packed with men in pigtails and baggy suits, women with short, tight dresses. Those must be the uniforms of the day. When

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she glanced back, Mace was gone, his drink still on the bar.

The other man was standing on tiptoe, straining to look over the heads of the patrons.

Ada thought fast. Her conference hadn't been too far from here. Neither was the office where Mace worked.

She was out the door and around the corner in time to see him striding away, the cane held halfway down and partially concealed by his arm as though he didn't want anyone to notice it.

The dreamlike quality persisted—a photo with blurred outer edges. Passing pedestrians were only shadows, and when he turned into the parking garage, there were no sounds, no odors of exhaust and oil and dead air. The Jaguar was a black shape, the concrete pillar beyond it not holding up the next level at all but soaring to an unseen sky, the yellow overheads dim stars.

He waited in the shadow of the pillar, his body curiously nonexistent, only his mind alive.

Five or six long steps, lift the cane, twist the handle, and keep moving. He felt no tenseness, no sense of anticipation, no emotion at all.

And then footsteps, exactly as he'd programmed them into the scenario, but not the firm heel-thudding sounds he'd imagined. Sharp and clicking. He closed his eyes, waiting for them to fade.

They became louder, firmer, not fading at all. He felt a chill, as though each click punched a hole in the fantasy he'd wrapped around himself the past few days.

"Good evening, Mr. Crandall."

The Rayburn woman. She didn't fit into this at all, had never been part of it. Something had gone wrong. The fabric of the fantasy began to tear.

He passed a hand over his face.

"We both might as well go, Mr. Crandall. Whatever you had in mind with that stupid cane isn't going to work now."

The fantasy shredded, dried up and disappeared. His body came alive, coated with the perspiration of the fear that follows a narrow escape; everything in focus once again—the oil stains and tire marks on the floor, the texture of the cement in the column, the woman before him dressed in a very expensive suit, the bandage straining the cloth of the left arm.

She knew.

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And if she knew, then he *hadn't* been handed a secret gift to fulfill his dream. The cane was just what it was—an infernal, evil device created by someone to kill with no fear of retribution—but not for his benefit. He stared at the wolf's head. No malevolence now; simply a superb carving with no message at all. There never had been one, except in his imagination.

Jesus, how your mind can see something that isn't there, simply because you *want* it to be there. He'd be baying at a full moon if he wasn't careful.

"What did you intend to do?" she asked softly. "Shoot your father?"

"Not my father," he whispered. "My brother."

"Oh, very good. An ancient solution for sibling jealousy." She took a deep breath. "ARE YOU NUTS?"

He winced. Not the first time he'd faced anger, but—something different here. Not the cold contempt he'd always heard, as though nothing more could be expected of him.

"Probably, but don't yell. I'm well aware of how close I came to doing something that would have haunted me the rest of my life. What brought you here, I don't know, but I thank you for saving me. Why *are* you here?"

"I don't know myself, except maybe to tell you a secret that good mothers have been passing on to their children since time began. If you don't respect yourself, no one else will respect you."

The difference came to him then. Her anger had a fire to it he'd never seen before—a concern for *him*, not for appearances.

He half grinned. "And you're a good mother?"

"I may not win any awards, but my children don't hide in parking garages waiting to shoot someone. There are other ways. Now let's get out of here so that I can continue your neglected education."

"One moment," said a deep voice.

Up close, the two men who had followed Mace were young and dark-haired, clean-shaven with bland faces and opaque eyes. They looked like brothers who patronized the same tailor and haberdasher. A set of molds somewhere, thought Mace, except for the eyes. One set blue, the other hazel, but both appeared to have been brought out of the deep freeze for their benefit.

Blue Eyes stepped forward and indicated the cane. "Please hand that to me, Mr. Crandall. We're willing to forget how you used it once—" he half bowed toward Ada "—but we'd be very unforgiving if you used it again."

Ada glared at them. "Who the hell are you two?"

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Hazel Eyes flashed a small leather folder before her so fast she saw nothing, but caught the unmistakable whiff of officialdom.

With three quick movements, Mace extracted the shell and reassembled the cane. "I never hand anyone a loaded weapon, but you don't get this one without an explanation."

Blue Eyes shrugged. "Within security limits. The courier carrying it was fatally injured in a traffic accident. It disappeared. It took a little time to find a light-fingered ghoul had sold it to the thrift shop, but the woman there could only give us your description. Then Detective Ruiz called—"

"I knew he'd figure it out," said Ada. "Okay, the man makes sense. Besides, who else has the time to sit around dreaming up crazy ideas on how to kill people? Give it to him."

"Not so fast." Swinging it like a bat, Mace smashed it against a corner of the concrete pillar, bending it slightly.

"They created this thing with our money. Damned if I want to pick up the paper one day and learn why." He held it out. "Try something else."

Hazel Eyes looked pained. "What do you think we are, Mr. Crandall? We didn't make the damned thing, much less intend to use it. It's evidence in a murder trial in England, brought to this country by an accomplice. Our job was to track it down." He sighted down the bent cane. "You shouldn't have done this. You might have jeopardized the prosecution—"

"If the jury is told it was smashed by a crazy American, they won't blink an eye."

He crooked an elbow for Ada. "How is my education coming along?"

"You're working on an A," she said.

As they neared the sidewalk, a man strode into the light; an older, slightly heavier version of Mace, his thudding heels bringing the dream back and sweat to Mace's palms. The man gave him a superior, smarty grin.

"Going for the very mature type now, Mace?"

Mace looked at Ada as if to say—you see?

"There are other ways," she said.

Mace nodded, pivoted, and dropped him to the dirty, oil-stained concrete floor with a beautiful right hook. Legs spread, braced on his hands, blood gushing onto his flowered tie and striped shirt, he stared up at them with bewildered eyes as Mace smugly caressed his bruised knuckles.

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Bernard was right, thought Ada. All this young man needs to straighten him out is a mother's touch. I've had my hands on him for only ten minutes and already he's at the head of the class.

She suppressed a smile, slapped him on the arm, and said sternly, "Now Mace, you apologize to your brother this instant."

DETECTIVERSE

FULL CIRCLE TRIANGLE

by W. ROBERT CORNWELL

Now she loved he
And he loved she,
But serpents still are slithery,
And when a snake
(A handsome rake)
Caused her her wedding vows to break,
The husband said,
"I'm seeing red—
That bloody bloke I did behead!"

A jury tried—
The husband fried—
Poetic justice was denied.
But she could not
Endure the plot,
And round her neck did noose a knot.
That fatal cord
Brought one reward:
Poetic justice was restored.

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An artist by training, Carmel, California resident Robert Campbell has enjoyed great success as a writer. 1994 will see the publication of a new Jimmy Flannery book, Sauce for the Goose *(Pocket Books).*

BODY PARTS

by ROBERT CAMPBELL

There's a city inside the city of Los Angeles. It was founded back in the late 1800s when the Southern Pacific Railroad built the first freight yards in the open fields near the river. Huge brick warehouses were erected; hotels where migrant workers and hobos, newly arrived merchants and prostitutes could find lodgings for twenty-five cents a night; cheap saloons and restaurants still crowding shoulder to shoulder along Seventh and Eighth streets. It is a city of brooding warehouses and vast blacktopped parking lots behind chain-link fences.

Today it's bordered by San Pedro Street on the west and the Los Angeles River on the east, First Street north and the Santa Monica Freeway south.

The citizens of this city are thieves who have killed in terror for the price of a nickel bag, prostitutes about to die of AIDS, transvestites with razors concealed in their mouths, cops dealing drugs, and chicken hawks wearing the collars of Catholic priests.

The air quakes with the rumble of powerful engines, a sound that men who once served in war will remember, the throaty growl of armored brigades heating up for battle, hundreds of trucks delivering goods from every state in the union, from Canada up north and Mexico down south, into the maw of Los Angeles.

This shifting army of truckers are wheeling, dealing, selling stolen goods, unloading legitimate merchandise, eating, drinking, filling up at the diesel pumps, sleeping in the cabs.

At any hour, but particularly at dusk, the sixteen-wheelers fill city blocks, the drivers haggling with the transvestite whores and ladies of pleasure, one at nearly every cab window, skirts hiked up

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to show their gartered thighs. Doing it in the cabs and on the tarmac and against the filthy flanks of the steel behemoths, twenty-four hours a day.

As the sky deepens to indigo, the gonnifs prowl the roofs, criss-crossing the terrain like desert wanderers, looking for a way in. Alarms go off like air-raid warnings; thieves scatter, disappearing into the shadows, down drainpipes, through the alleys and into homemade bunkers, laughing up their sleeves at the cops who are always a nickel short and an hour late.

When they are too tired to steal, they scavenge.

They are at the bottom of the food chain.

They are the freelance foot soldiers for the fences, juicemen, pimps, warlords, and labor hoodlums who huddle at the top of the chain in dimly lit warehouse offices, Dodge vans, the back rooms of middle-of-the-night taverns, and the all but empty flats at the top of long flights of narrow stairs.

These aristocrats live elsewhere but they visit the battlefield nearly every night, planning strategies and conspiracies like Borgia princes.

Dick Daring was not a prince but he was one of the more accomplished scavengers. Daring wasn't his real name. Neither was Dick for that matter. Sometimes he forgot what his name had been before crack grabbed him by the nose and fried his brain.

In prison, cigarettes are the currency of choice. In the Warehouse District city, wooden pallets upon which any kind of merchandise you can name or dream about is moved from place to place, stacked, and stored, are important legal tender worth three dollars each.

Daring was the best at finding or stealing pallets. He slept on one, sheltered in a hootch made of cardboard in the corner of a fence, protection against the damp that seemed to rise up from the pavement as soon as the sun went down.

When pallets were scarce, he worked as a lumper, unloading trucks for a dollar a thousand pounds or acting as navigator for truckers who didn't know how to get where they were going.

Several times he did men great injury when they were weaker than he or otherwise unable to defend themselves. Twice he killed over nothing much.

Once there had been much hopeful optimism surrounding the District; expectations that artists buying up or leasing loft space for

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live-in studios would do as they had done for Venice and Ocean Park, upgrading the entire area, bringing gentrification in their wake. It never happened.

Those who remain slink home through the shadows for safety's sake and live besieged behind barred doors and windows.

Without the means to do otherwise some, like Billy Greco, hang on because to flee would mean the end of pride along with all else, like the hope of fame, power, riches, honor, and the love of beautiful women.

He spends the day fashioning body parts of plasticene and casting them in plaster and papier-mâché, telling any who will listen that he was there with life-sized lifelike figure sculptures long before others more famous than he came along to steal the plum from his mouth.

There's nothing, he says, that will embitter a man more than knowing others are profiting greatly with an invention of his own making.

He was ageing and broke and hungry and ripe for an offer. He even thought sometimes of going up on the roofs and becoming a thief but doubted he had the legs for it anymore.

In the office of a vast warehouse for the keeping of stolen goods, the warlords of this fiefdom sit around doing the dozens on one another and dreaming schemes.

"You want somebody done, you hire yourself a Blood or Crip, a gang-banger," Killicut, the pimp, said. "They think they got brass balls what clang when they walk. You want somebody done, you hire yourself a gang-banger."

Mister, the odds-maker, the book, the banker, sat there in his gray tweed overcoat with velvet collar, his hands safe in gray kid gloves, shoes polished to a high gloss, homburg hat on his head tilted twenty saucy degrees, taking the edge off the wealthy attitude he carried around like a warning.

"Oh Jesus Christ, what do you know about these youths?" Hoxie, the fence, the pawnbroker, scoffed. "You ask them to do a job of work, any job of work, even something they dearly love to do, would even do for nothing, for the fun of it, and all of a sudden they become undependable. Like it's a point of honor with them that they should take your money and bug off, leaving you with the job still to do."

"What makes you think you got to pay them up front?" Killicut protested.

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"You got to pay an assassin half when he takes the contract," Mister said softly, "them's the rules."

"What you want is an ex-cop or an ex-con, one or the other," Barnaby, the bone-breaker, said. "They both understand the meaning of honor and commitment."

"But either one of them, once the job is done to your satisfaction, will find it easy to put their loyalties on the shelf," Killicut said. "If times get tough, they'll be back at you, one or the other or both of these types, to shake you down and pick your pockets. If caught, they'll testify," Killicut said.

"What you want is an old man with nothing to lose," Hoxie said.

"What you want is a young man with everything to gain," Killicut said.

"Thank you for your advice, gentlemen," Mister said. "I'll get back to you."

"Is Dick Daring your real name?" Mister asked.

"Is Mister yours?"

"It's the one I go by."

"Same with me."

"All right then, I'll call you Daring," Mister said.

"I'll call you Mister."

"I've been told you're not afraid to face a man?"

"Who told you that?"

"The street."

"The street don't lie," Daring said, taking a hitch at the waistband of his sagging trousers with his wrists, the way wiseguys made the move.

"What's the going rate for doing a man?"

"Who?"

"Does it matter?"

"Does it matter?" Daring echoed incredulously, his eyes popping, his mouth wide, laughter spilling out of him like a flood as he sat there still as a stone.

Mister waited until the laughter subsided and said, "In what way does it matter?"

"You take a man's life who has a girlfriend, a brother, a father, or many friends and you might have to flee or die. You ask me to off a man who eats beans out of a can, it costs you a stone. You ask me to off a prince like yourself, it costs you a mountain."

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"How about a man who lives alone but has very few associations? A straight john, not one of the brethren?"

"Not one of us? A vagabond? A cowboy?"

"Not a transient and not a trucker. A local."

"Merchant, barkeep, what?"

"One of the artists. He makes body parts out of plaster and papier-mâché, I've been told."

"Oh, one of them," Daring said, making a face of disdain. "One of the moles what hide from the night."

"Make me a price."

"One large."

"Two small."

"Split the difference?"

"All right. Five small."

Daring was about to point out that splitting the difference between two hundred and one thousand was six hundred but when Mister reached into his coat pocket, plucked out his roll, and peeled off five fifty-dollar bills, it made all the difference.

"Half now, half when the job's done," Mister said.

"When?"

"Wednesday night. That's a nice quiet night."

"The night after tomorrow night?" Daring said, double-checking. When Mister nodded, Daring added, "You got a name? You got an address?"

Mister handed Daring a three-by-five file card upon which he'd printed the necessary information.

"You understand something," Mister said. "I'm not going to just take your word on this. When you do the job, you've got to show me you done it. I got to know the sucker's dead. You understand what I'm saying?"

Daring stuck his thumb in the air.

"I don't know much of anything about art but I know what I like, Mr. Greco," Mister said.

Billy Greco preened his moustache, anticipating the delicious meal of compliments to come. "You've seen my work?"

"Body parts. You mold body parts and paint them blue, purple, and pink."

"I'm not doing pastels now. Now I'm doing metallics. Silver, bronze, and gold."

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"Oh, that's good. That's nice," Mister said. "I saw a blue one you did. Somebody there had a great pair of tits."

"Felice. That must have been Felice. Marvelous body."

"Great tits."

"Just like you say," Greco agreed, still looking for compliments.

"You sell many of these body parts?" Mister asked, his expression as flat as the bottom of a frying pan.

Greco hesitated.

"Don't lie to me," Mister said, "because I'm about to make you an offer."

"My dealer's been falling down on the job," Greco said.

"What you just said? That's like lying to me."

"It's been awhile since I sold anything," Greco said.

"Like forever?"

"A long time," Greco reluctantly confessed, knowing that greedy collectors used an artist's poverty against him to hammer prices into the dirt. He waited to hear the insulting offer he wouldn't be able to refuse.

"I don't like what you make," Mister said. "I mean, who wants body parts hanging on the wall? It'd be like living in a morgue or a butcher shop."

Greco felt a chill. He looked around for an open door, the source of the draft.

"I thought you asked me here to make me an offer."

"I've got a job opportunity for you."

"What sort of job?" Greco asked, thinking, here it comes, the supreme insult, this prince was going to ask him to paint his house, a warehouse, a saloon, something like that.

"You was in Nam?" Mister asked.

"I was."

"I hear tell you were very good at killing."

"I did my share."

"So?"

"So, what?"

"There's somebody needs to be terminated with extreme prejudice," Mister said, then smiled as though expecting Greco to admire his command of the jargon of war.

"Why don't you do it yourself? I hear tell you're no stranger to termination," Greco said.

"I don't do that sort of thing myself anymore," Mister said, never asking where Greco had come by the information, accepting the fact

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that his reputation was widespread, looking at his hands as though drawing attention to the finely manicured nails, making the point that he was a prince and had no need to soil his fingers these days.

"What makes you think I do?" Greco asked.

"This person what's irritating me ain't worth as much as some of the gooks you killed."

Greco was trembling.

"We're talking about your survival here," Mister said. "You need the money."

"What are the rules?"

"You do this person for me on Wednesday night. Then you show me his dead body. I need proof, you understand that?"

"Body count."

"That's the ticket. I have to show a couple people that I mean what I say."

"How much?"

"You tell me."

Greco shook his head. "Make me an offer. I'll say yes or I'll say no. I won't haggle. I won't negotiate."

"Five smalls."

Greco started to shake his head, started to rise.

"One large," Mister quickly amended, having done a quick calculation of how much he would make on the book. He took the roll from his pocket and started counting out five hundred dollars in fifties. "The person's name is Dick Daring and he waters down at Callagan's Pub on Seventh Street."

Dick Daring looked Billy Greco over on Tuesday afternoon.

On Wednesday afternoon, during the loneliest hour of the day, he sat just down the bar from him in Callagan's Pub on 7th Street, having followed him there from the otherwise vacant building in which the artist had his loft.

He sucked on a gin and tonic, figuring out how to take this yo-yo down, what spot to pick for the killing ground.

First of all, this Greco looked very fit, not like a man who was keeping up on his exercise, but like a man who'd once been strong and still had some strength left from his youth. So when he used the knife he had tucked in his sock, it'd have to be when Greco wasn't looking, all unaware.

Greco was also a heavy boozer, Daring could see that in the puffy flesh around the eyes and the way Greco sucked up his beer, a

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shot of whiskey sitting there like a burning topaz waiting for his pleasure.

So that could help, that could be useful if he struck up a conversation. You could make friends with a boozer quicker than farting, because some didn't like to drink alone and some depended on the charity of strangers when their own pockets ran dry and some just didn't know any better.

He caught Greco's eye and nodded and smiled and the next thing you know he was sidling down from stool to stool, getting friendly along the way, the notion having arrived that if he pumped up this two-fisted drinker with some high-octane alkie, he'd have an easier time of it getting him to a private venue and offing him in private instead of on the public thoroughfare.

"This is my watering hole," Daring said. "How come I ain't seen you before?"

"Because it's not mine. I usually drink over at Philly's on Bay Street."

"I know the place. I been there a time or two, but Callagan's is my home."

"I felt like a change."

"Well, good for you. Here's mud in your eye," Daring said, knocking back his gin.

"Up the rebels," Greco replied, placing the shot glass on his extended lower lip, opening his mouth, and tossing his head back as though performing a feat of sleight of hand. He took a long swallow of the beer, the chill of it adding pleasurable pain to the ecstatic choke of the whiskey.

"That your pleasure?" Daring asked.

Greco hesitated, the natural wariness of a man who lived among men not notable for their quick friendliness or easy generosity. But finally he nodded his acceptance because the idea struck him how he could get this gazoony loaded on gin and take him back to the loft where he could kill him without much noise and little bother.

It went on that way, Daring buying for Greco and Greco buying for Daring and the bartender giving them one on the house every now and then.

They told each other lies with some of the truth laced through it, interweavings of melancholy purple, wishful yellow, and disappointment green.

"Dick, you got to come home with me. I want you to see my things. My art. I want you to see what I do," Greco said, the words sliding sideways off his tongue.

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"Jeez, I'd love that, Billy. I'd really love that. You think you can walk?" Daring asked, feeling tender to this poor drunken lamb who was delivering itself up to his knife.

"I can walk. It's not that far," Greco insisted.

"I mean if you're having trouble walking," Daring said, sliding off the stool, his knees bending when his feet hit the floor, nearly collapsing, reaching out a hand and grabbing Greco's arm to steady himself, "we could take a cab."

"No, no, we don't need a cab. Where'd we find a cruiser down along here anyway?"

"You're right, Billy, and when you're right you're right. Let's walk over to your place. Don't worry, I'll take care of you."

"I was just about to say the same thing, old pal. Old Dick."

The bartender watched them with hooded eyes, wondering which of them was going to do damage to the other. Which one was sober enough? Who was the stone killer of the two? The nighttime speculation of a gambler who thought he could read minds and understood human nature.

He reached for the phone and called the number Mister had discreetly spread around town.

"This is Jerry over at Callagan's. I'd like to lay down a bet on the shootout," he said. "What are the odds?"

"Six to five either way."

That way Mister made seventeen percent on every bet placed no matter who came out on top. A bookie's cut.

He'd already made it known that if both survived or both died, one killing the other and the other managing to kill in return before he coughed his last, all bets were off and he'd merely skim five percent off the top for setting up the book in the first place. An accountant's fee.

"A hundred bucks on Dick Daring, the thief, to win."

They made it back to Greco's loft with no trouble, staggering through the cold night with their arms around one another, old friends already, bosom buddies, Daring with the knife in his sock and Greco with his pistol in his pocket.

Up the stairs to the top floor of the converted warehouse, empty of tenants but for Billy Greco, the sculptor of body parts.

"Come in, come in, come in," Greco said, waving his arms around in an excess of good fellowship like a scarecrow gone mad.

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His fist caught Daring alongside the head and he went down on one knee from a blow that would have scarcely tipped him sideways had he been sober.

The knife fell out of his sock and clattered on the bare wooden floor.

Greco was on his knees beside him in a flash, patting him on the cheek, tears springing to his eyes. He tried to lift a limp Dick Daring with his arms around his waist and chest.

"I didn't mean to hit you, buddy. I never did. I hope I didn't hurt you. Let me help you . . ."

Then it registered a little late that what he'd heard and what he saw gleaming there upon the floor was a weapon that could do him serious injury, and his words were cut off as though his throat had, indeed, been sliced by the blade.

"I'm okay," Daring said. "I walked right into it. Let's have ourselves a drink and . . ."

His fluttering tongue got tangled in his words of assurance, for he'd seen the direction of Greco's glance and felt the bulge of the pistol in Greco's pocket at the same moment. He was not so drunk that he didn't realize in a flash what the gun was meant for.

"You're carrying a knife."

"You got a gun."

Both speaking at the same time, Greco scrambling back on his knees, Daring getting his feet under him and crouching there, both of them somewhat sobered, the alcohol burned away in the sudden surge of adrenaline released by fear.

"Where'd you get the money to buy me drinks?" Daring asked.

"I'd like to know the same," Greco said.

"Somebody paid me to do you," Daring said.

"Likewise. So here we are in the middle of a coincidence. Somebody apparently wants you dead and somebody wants me dead."

"Do you suppose it could be the same somebody?"

"Mister," they said together.

They knelt and squatted there, thinking that one over.

"What's going on?" Daring asked.

"It's not hard to figure. Mister's a bookie among other things. He points us at one another and makes book on who comes out alive."

"How much was he paying you?" Daring asked, ever the competitive man.

"A thousand dollars, half and half."

"That rotten sonofabitch, he's paying me five small."

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"He's a ravenous man, is Mister," Greco said.

"Why didn't he offer us the same?" Daring asked, much offended.

"Because he thinks more highly of your skills than mine. He never expected to pay me the final five. So looking at it his way, when he pays you the next two fifty for doing me, it'll be five and five. You got paid five and I got paid five. A thousand dollars. His expenses."

They continued to kneel and crouch in silence.

Finally Greco said, "We can't just stay here like this, my knees are getting sore."

"And my legs are starting to ache."

"What we can do is, I can take off my jacket with the pistol in the pocket very slowly and you can push it to one side, and we can both reach out at the same time and push your knife away," Greco said. "Then we can stand up and take a seat, have a drink, and think about this."

"Let's do that," Daring said.

"I can't see us going at one another with feet and fists, since neither of us can now take advantage of the knife or gun," Greco finally said.

"Besides, I got to tell you, I ain't got the stomach for killing you," Daring said.

"Me too. It's hard to kill a friend," Greco said.

"Let's just say we had a change of mind, a change of heart," Daring said. "We'll give Mister back his money."

"He'd never go for that. Besides, I already spent at least forty dollars of my advance buying drinks."

"Me the same."

"He give you the rules?"

"I got to give him proof that I done you. I got to show him your dead body."

"Same rules," Greco said. "So, I guess we've got to go through with it."

"Oh, this is going to be so hard," Daring said. "I never killed a friend before."

"Me neither. But we won't have to. Neither one of us. Come help me set the stage."

He stood up, went to a work table, gathered up a saber saw, drill, chisel, and hammer, and paced off the floor until he found the spot. Craftsman that he was, it took him almost no time at all to saw the

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floorboards through and create a trap door with a hole in it through which a man could stick his head.

"All you've got to do is let me make up your face with white and gray paint. Maybe a trickle of red as though I'd shot you through the lung and your mouth filled up with blood before you died," Greco said.

"I don't know about this," Daring said, naturally cautious, naturally distrustful, even though he did not quite yet see the trick.

"Then you lie down in the space between the downstairs ceiling and the upstairs floor and stick your head up through the hole," Greco went on.

"I don't think so," Daring murmured.

"I take a torso and some arms and legs from among these papier-mâché body parts, glue a bag of paint behind the chest, dress the manufactured body in your clothes, and arrange them below your head in a lifelike . . . deathlike . . . manner."

"I could do the same for you, Billy," Daring said.

"It'll take an artist to make it look real. It's that or welshing on our deal with Mister, which will surely mean leaving town forever or getting ready to die."

"Can I—" Daring started to say.

"Don't ask me," Greco said. "For God's sake don't ask me if you can trust me not to kill you when you're lying helpless under the floor. Tonight I thought I found a friend. It's up to you to say if you feel the same."

"Okay, Billy buddy," Daring said, "paint me up."

They climbed the stairs to Greco's loft, Killicut, Barnaby, and Hoxie, trailing after the king rat, Mister himself, natty in his gray tweed overcoat with the velvet collar, gray kid gloves, and homburg hat tilted twenty degrees, the tellers of the bet, judge and jury.

Greco invited them into the dimly lit cavern of a room, then turned his back and took a stance, pistol dangling from the hand at his side, on the other side of the body lying in the center of the rag-strewn floor.

Mister regarded him with something like respect in his cold, calculating eyes.

"Satisfied?" Greco asked.

"It looks like you done the job," Mister said, reaching into his pocket for his roll. "Now give me the proof."

"It's there before your eyes."

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"I've heard of shot men getting up and walking away," Mister said.

Greco pointed the gun at the body and fired three times, the shots cracking, the echoes bouncing off the walls. Blood splashed high from the new chest wounds. He held out the gun. "You want to try?"

Mister peeled off five smalls from the roll and handed them over.

"I might have use for you another time, old man," he said.

When they were gone, Greco lifted the trap door and let Daring out, kicking aside the body parts, which bounced and slid across the floor.

"So, that's that," Daring said. "We winked him."

"No, that's not that," Greco said. "If Mister ever sees hide or hair of you, hears a whisper from wherever you might be, you'll be in for it and so will I, because princes like Mister have reputations to keep."

Daring sat down heavily in a chair. "I never thought."

Greco counted the money he'd been given and added that which was in his pocket. "I make it nine hundred and sixty-five of Mister's dollars that I've got. You?"

Daring counted his money. "Two hundred and twenty. I had myself a dinner besides the drinks I bought."

"Eleven hundred eighty-five smears," Greco said. "Let's say an even thousand. We'll keep a hundred and eighty-five to celebrate."

"You say you're a full-time trucker?" Greco asked the burly, ham-fisted man who sat with him and Daring at a corner table in Callagan's. They'd met him there after making their way in disguise through the back alleys and the back door of the saloon.

"It's what I do," the trucker said. "It's what gets me from place to place."

"But that's not all you do?"

"You already know otherwise or we wouldn't be here talking."

"How much?" Daring asked.

"One large," the trucker said. "Half now, half after the job is done."

Greco counted out five hundred dollars.

"All I need now is a name and address," the trucker said.

"The only name he has is Mister," Greco said. "But everybody knows him by that name."

"Just look for a prince by the name of Mister," Daring said. "We'll pay you the other five when you've done the job."●

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THE APPLE TREE

by EILEEN HERBERT JORDAN

He could do washers and dryers, don't think he couldn't. They were always in laundry rooms, steamy and smelling of bleach, with soggy clothes filling machines that had not been drained or heated. He could do dishwashers and stoves and microwave ovens—he had been in too many kitchens. And he had kept up. He could handle all the new electronic devices on the market. He had strong hands and he had trained them—they knew exactly what moves to make. That was all you needed—hands that you kept trained—and strong. Not that he was a handyman. He could be one and had been, in those funny little towns in between, where no one knew him. No more. This was different. None of the other jobs had been like this. A whole house just waiting to be tied up his way—just waiting for him to wrap somebody inside. Safe and warm. Safe and warm . . . this was the best.

"You'll need a four-digit code number," the security man said. There was a metal badge in the shape of a helmet on his shirt pocket with the word EverArmored spelled out across the top. The badge glinted in the hall light as Cathy watched him. He was tall and balding, with heavy glasses that slipped on his nose as he bent to study the instrument box he was fastening near the front door of the house. He had arrived that morning with a crate of equipment and had already installed a large box in the hall closet and another small one near the side door.

"Pick a number you can remember without writing it down," he said to her. "It's like your PIN number at the bank machine."

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"All right," she said. "How about nineteen eighty-eight? That's the year I was married. There's no way I'll forget that."

"Okay," he said. "Why not?" He stabbed the screwdriver into the slit. "By the way," he said, "most people can see these numbers without glasses. They're designed that way. I've positioned this so it's comfortable for you to reach." He looked over at her. "You're a little girl. Come here and try it."

She walked over and peered at the instrument box, which looked like a calculator. Like smoke, a scent filled the tiny hallway. Brut. She smiled to herself. Her husband, Tom, hated Brut. And he had not been crazy about the idea of the security system, either.

"It seems fine," she said.

You move from the city to be safe. You flee the siren song of it, forget the way it used to be for you both, or try to, forget that the first time you climbed the stairs in Grand Central Station you thought they were iridescent (Grand Central closes early, unsafe and out of bounds), forget the songs that followed you down city streets, forget that you fell in love in some of these streets and made love in rooms in brownstones—and lofts—and studio apartments—forget it all. Now the most important thing is to be safe, so you go where safety is. You are married and you have a baby; you would die for him. Crack dealers on street corners, meat cleavers in subways, guns and knives . . . no way.

You move to the country. Not really the country—the suburbs—an expensive, utterly extravagant thing to do, you find. By the time the extras are covered, there is little left for anything else. Inside or outside. You don't budget in security—you have bought it. You have the tree near the baby's window cut down to let the sunlight in and you let it go at that.

The security man tapped the box on the wall. "Now, when you come in," he said, "the first thing you do is punch out your code number here to deactivate the system. You have five minutes to do that."

"What about other people?" she said. "I gave a key to my mother and my sister, and I'll probably give one to my neighbor across the street—" She opened a Wedgwood box and spread keys on the hall table. "I just had more duplicates made."

"No problem. As long as they know the code. Our office should have a key, too. For security. And you need a code word."

"A word?"

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"Yeah. Say somebody breaks in. The alarm goes off. Our office gets the call first and calls you to see if it's a false alarm. Windstorms, tree branches falling, things like that—you get false alarms. So they call you and by this time maybe some guy is holding a gun to your head. What do you do? You give them the *wrong* code word. That's how they know something's happening—and they move. Foolproof."

"Bermuda," she said. "Nineteen eighty-eight was our wedding—Bermuda was our honeymoon."

"Bermuda," he said. "I never been there."

"It's wonderful," she said. "But I'm probably prejudiced."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Yeah," he said. "I guess you are." He gave an extra-sharp twist to the last screw. "Remember, always keep your doors locked and your system on. Oh, if you have a party you might want to deactivate it, but otherwise, no. I just came east from California and they just live by these out there. Lots of famous people, you know."

"Well, it's a big state. My ex-roommate lives there and she's not famous."

"Maybe not," he said, "but I'll bet she wants to be safe. They all do. Makes them feel real good." He dropped the screwdriver into his tool case and shut it. "Now you can relax. Now you can really take it easy."

"Good," she said. "I like to take an afternoon nap when the baby sleeps."

"Yeah?" he said. "Well, make sure this is on and your doors are locked. You'll be all set."

Bedrooms. Bedrooms with broad beds all piled with pillows and down comforters like clouds; he liked to go to the furniture department in Bloomingdale's and just walk around, looking at them. Sometimes they had curtains that fell down on each side of the bed, as if you could hide there. As if you could hide.

The first person who mentioned a security system had been her neighbor, Lee. The day after they moved in she appeared at the side door carrying a coffee cake. She wanted to welcome them, she explained. She lived across the street, and she was one of the few stay-at-home mothers in the neighborhood. Most of the women worked. There were a couple of nannies, but most of the children went to day care or pre-nursery.

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"It's pretty deserted," she said, as Cathy let her in. "I hope you're getting security. For this door especially."

"Security?"

"Sure. Look how close this door is to your basement door. Isn't that where your laundry room is?"

Cathy nodded.

"How many loads of laundry do you do a day? Two? Three? Plus the drying. You're down there and you can't hear a thing—they always wear sneakers—and he's up here waiting to pounce. He's probably already taken your silver—it's in the dining room, right? They know the layouts of all these houses."

She nodded again. "My grandmother's sterling," she said.

"See? Jewelry?"

"I don't have any jewelry. Well, only my diamond. And I don't wear that when I'm doing housework."

"No. You keep it in your bedroom, in the right-hand top drawer of your dresser. That's the jewelry drawer. The first place they look. You could try being more inventive. Not the freezer—they're on to that. And look where that telephone is—all the way across the room."

They were standing in the large, sunny kitchen, the joy of Cathy's life, refugee as she was from a kitchen the size of a throw rug.

"You'd never be able to reach it. Get a portable. Anyway, he gets everything he came for and then he stands here waiting to rape you. The simplest thing is to have a security system. That way you don't have to skulk around and hide everything."

"Do we have to live that way?" she said to Tom after Lee had left.

"I didn't think so," he said. "I thought that was why we moved."

"I don't want to get paranoid," she said.

"I don't want you to, either," he said. "I'll love you if you do, but it might not be as much fun. It's up to you." He ran a finger lightly across the curve of her cheek, the lobe of her ear. She closed her eyes. She loved a gentle man and he loved her back. She hardly even thought about it then; not until later.

"All I want is for you to be happy," Tom said.

So the security system did not come about because of Lee. It was because of the stranger.

They had been living in the house for about a month the first time she saw him. It was late in the afternoon. She had picked up the baby's toys from the lawn and started back inside through the side door before she was even aware that someone was casting a shadow

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across the sun-dappled sidewalk. She peered out through the dining room window. A man was standing at the foot of the driveway. Just standing. He was wearing torn jeans and sneakers and a worn T-shirt—a grubby look in the manicured world around them—and a dark beard made it impossible to tell his age. But it was not so much his looks as it was something fierce about his stance that struck Cathy. And about the way he stared. At the house? At the yard? At the window? She had not yet hung curtains, so obviously, as she could see him, he could, if he looked at a certain angle, see her. She backed away. Five minutes later she looked again. He was gone. That was the first day.

She didn't mention it to Tom that night. What was there to say? Anyone might walk down a street and stop to look at a house. Anyone. The fact that she hadn't seen anyone do it before certainly didn't prove anything. She would not even have noticed him, she told herself, had it not been for the conversation with Lee.

Two days later she saw him again. This time it was dusk. The children in surrounding houses who had played outside after dinner, as they did in summer, had all been called inside. Lights went on; baths were being run. Blue shadows shrouded the lawns, the sidewalks were deserted. Tom was working late, as he often was these days.

He stopped precisely where he had stopped before. Then, as if he was looking for something in the gloom, he walked a few yards down the driveway, stopping at the point where the house began. Even in the fading light there was something intense about his movements. She was holding the baby in her arms and she darted into the center hall before he could see her through the window. Did he know there was a baby in the house? Of course he did—he must have seen the toys. Kidnappers cased houses well. But why *their* baby? Rock stars and oil barons and Arab sheiks needed bodyguards for their children, not parents in Cape Cod houses in the suburbs. She crooned in the baby's ear and he nestled his head, smooth as silk, into her shoulder.

That was it; he was so beautiful. Even in the hospital, perfect strangers had raved about him. The maternity nurse had called him the baby of the year. And if you read newspapers or watched daytime television, as she did these days, you knew that the world is full of demons preying on children, disappearing with babies who are never seen again. What a fortune he would bring on the black market.

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She held him so close that he wriggled in her arms; she had never been afraid before. Not even in the city years. She had been bad about locks in the apartment, always jamming them. She had lost keys. The locksmith was forever coming to change the locks, causing the whole process of entry to go full circle each time. But that had been then, and this was now. And that had been her—and this was the baby.

She had no idea how long he stood there. She only knew that after she put the baby to bed and the night was really dark, she looked out again and he was gone. Or so it seemed. She curled up in the living room with all the lights on, waiting for Tom. When he came home he was in a foul mood—the blank-blank railroad—it had been stuck outside the station for twenty minutes. And his boss was starting a series of breakfast meetings, which meant rising at the crack of dawn; it was not a night to tell him anything. But she couldn't sleep and she wandered through the house in the early morning hours before dawn, tiptoeing into the baby's room and watching a moonbeam flicker across his forehead. She wanted to pick him up and hold him tight again, even take him into bed with the two of them, but she resisted.

When she slept at last, she dreamed of being stalked by a werewolf. She had seen a television program in which Sally Jessy Raphael talked to women who had been stalked—all but one whom she couldn't talk to because she had been murdered by her stalker. In most cases the police weren't able to do anything. She knew by now that bizarre things happened to women who appeared on TV talk shows; nothing remotely like them ever had happened to her. Still, the werewolf stalked her dreams as she clutched the baby, and from far off the policeman's voice kept repeating, *There isn't anything I can do, there isn't anything I can do,* just as he had done on Sally Jessy Raphael.

She began watching for him. If she could catch him at something, taking a picture, maybe, or carrying something odd—a duffle bag would hold a baby—or if he had a weapon and she could see it. For three days she watched. Whenever she passed a window, she looked out. Whenever she went outside, she looked down the driveway first, before turning her back on the street. She never let the baby out of her sight.

"What's with you?" Tom said one evening, after she had gone to the nursery for the fourth time since dinner.

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"He was fussy today," she said. "I just wanted to check—"

By now she thought she was going a little crazy. How could she be like this and Tom be the way he was. He was so proud of what they had. For all the railroad glitches and the hassle of commuting, there were moments when he stretched out on the hammock in the backyard and beamed at her and said, "Ah, this makes it worth it. This is the life." She couldn't bear to tell him.

A week passed and she saw him again. He was on the other side of the street this time and he paused only imperceptibly, to gaze over. Maybe he was losing interest. Or, more likely, he was getting a broader picture of the property. You could do that from a distance. Their bedroom and the baby's room were on the second floor. Next to the baby's room there was a door leading to a sundeck. From across the street he would be able to see that the sundeck was easily accessible via a rose trellis fastened to the side of the house. But he wouldn't know where the bedrooms were, would he? *They know the layout of all these houses:* Lee's words. She shivered.

That night, as she and Tom were having coffee, she said, "Remember that security system Lee mentioned when we first moved in?"

"I certainly do," he said. "Why?"

"You know, I've been giving it more thought," she said.

"Don't back into this," he said. "What are you saying?"

And she told him. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. "My God," he said. "Why didn't you tell me? We'll call the police—"

"The police can't help," she said. "But a security system will. I've seen lots of them as I drive around. I never knew they were so common." It was true. In all the residential areas, on block after block, there were signs on posts at doorsteps: Strongarm, Watchman, Safetyline, Elephant (He Never Forgets), all testifying that these houses were protected, untouchable, impregnable, safe.

"And since I'm not going to be as agile as I usually am at fending off intruders . . . " She kissed him and he ran a hand around the curve of her ear; she was pregnant again.

"Do it first thing tomorrow," he said. "I'll be a nervous wreck until you do. We can swing it—or we *will* swing it. I wish I didn't have these damned meetings so I could take some time. But I can't have you nervous. Are you nervous?"

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"Not if we get this right away," she said. "That will do it. I'll look in the yellow pages tomorrow and get some estimates."

By this time of year, the blossoms were gone, but the leaves were thickest, the branches like canopies, vines from the house tangling around them; it was perfect. The summer he was nine his aunt gave him a combat disguise outfit for his birthday, but you didn't even need that up there—you could wear anything and hide. The cat, with her silver-gray coat, would cling to the bark of the trunk beside him and just disappear. Sometimes he could hear them calling him. He could hear his brother slapping the day lilies at the back of the yard, thinking he was there; it was great. No one saw him jump from a branch to the sundeck; no one knew how he materialized inside the house. When the climate was right, it was perfect.

For days after the security system was installed, she did not see the stranger with the beard. The fact was, however, she quite possibly forgot to look. It didn't matter so much anymore. At the end of the walk, near the doorway, there was now a tin helmet on a pole with the word EverArmored spelled out across the top. It was like having a moat around the house—an idea that appealed to her enormously.

It wasn't as good in winter, of course. Even when it snowed the sticky kind of snow, any movement would cause it to rain on the ground and leave the branches bare. That didn't work at all and it was a waste of time to bother—it just wasn't right.

It was raining. A soft summer rain that had begun in the morning and continued as the afternoon wore on. When the baby was settled for his nap, she took off her jeans and slipped into bed, under the sheets, in just her T-shirt and underpants.

She could sleep anytime now. Her body had the lazy, languorous feeling she remembered so well, as if it were beginning to be wrapped in yards of cotton batting, insulating it from the outside. The nursery monitor was on the nightstand beside her in case the baby cried, and her ear was tuned to hear that, but the day before, a Sunday, she had napped and not even heard Tom stomping down the hall in work boots, whistling for her.

So, of course, she heard nothing at the start. The doors all needed oil and squeaked—they had laughed about it but hadn't done anything. The hall was tiled—noisier, but easier to keep clean. She

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heard nothing until something stirred her—some dream ended. She opened her eyes. There was a sound in the room, very soft. The sound of someone breathing. There was a scent like smoke in the air. Brut. She bolted upright. He was standing at the foot of the bed.

"Ah," he said, "the little girl. And aren't you peaceful now? Didn't I say you would be? Didn't I tell you that? That's what I do. I do that for all my ladies. I make them feel safe. I make them relax. I like them that way. Nice and soft and warm and easy and all relaxed—just waiting."

He was barring the door with one hand, grasping the bedpost with the other. She screamed. He started toward her. She screamed again; her screams bounced off the walls, back at her.

"No, no, no," he said. "Don't do that. Nobody can hear you anyway. You're being a good girl, aren't you? You're keeping the windows closed the way I told you to do. We're locked in together. I knew we would be—didn't you know that? I've deactivated the system for you. Nineteen eighty-eight—the year you were married, isn't that what you said?" He kept inching closer to her side. "I'll make you forget that. I'll be better—I'll be better than he was. Ask my ladies in California . . . "

She pulled the sheets around her to ward him off and rolled to the other side of the bed. *The telephone* . . . She grabbed for it. He darted around the bed and pulled it out of her hands.

"No, no," he said. "We're not going to *tell* anyone. And you'll only get yourself all upset. I don't want that. You won't be all warm and easy anymore then. Besides, I would talk to the police if you did call them. I would tell them we are testing the new equipment. Isn't that what we are doing? I would give them your code word. Bermuda, right? Where you spent your honeymoon—to go with nineteen eighty-eight. This will be better—much, much better." He pulled the phone jack out of the wall and tossed the instrument across the room, where it fell on the wicker chair. He picked up the edge of the comforter and caressed it; his hands were large and sinewed. "White," he said. "White like your skin. Do you know that I like you more than my California ladies? They were all so tan. I like white skin—just like yours. I'd like to feel every part of you. And we have hours . . . we have hours and hours. Your husband works late—you told me that. . . . "

Faint sounds began coming from the monitor; a whimpering noise, not yet quite a cry. He stopped and bent over, frowning, looking back and forth for the sound. His glasses slipped on his nose. "Oh,"

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he said at last. "That's the baby, isn't it? You know, I don't like babies. I don't like babies at all."

Ohmygod, she thought. The baby. Did he know where the baby's room was? Of course he did. He knew where everything in the house was.

"Babies take up a mother's time," he said. "And I want them to spend their time with me. Don't worry—we won't let the baby hurry us. We'll do something if he tries to hurry us. We want to take all the time in the world—all the time."

The sounds from the monitor stopped. The baby had been having a dream. Her side of the bed was nearest the door. Still holding the sheet, she inched back over. He darted around again, put a hand on each shoulder, his fingers pinching her, and pressed her against the pillows.

"Do you like this side of the bed?" he said. "Where it's warm? Where it's warm from your beautiful body?"

The whimpering noises from the monitor resumed. He stopped, loosening his hold just a fraction. "I don't like whining," he said. "And I don't want to have to stop and go after that baby—"

"I'll quiet him," she said. Her voice sounded strangled. "I'll go in and quiet him."

"Oh no," he said. "You won't do that." He smiled, more a baring of teeth than a smile. "I want you to pay attention to me—not him. I want you to feel my hands—everywhere. Remember we talked about somebody holding a gun on you? I don't have a gun. I don't need one. I've never needed one. I have these." His hands were moving on her shoulders, pulling on the T-shirt. It was an old one and it started to rip as he pulled it. He gave one strong tear and the sleeve gave way. For an instant her hand was freed.

She had spent vacations with her grandmother. Her grandmother's eyesight was poor and she kept her glasses on a satin ribbon around her neck. "You can't think without your glasses," she used to say. "All your mental processes seem to disintegrate when you lose your glasses."

In a flash her hand darted out, grabbed the glasses from his nose, and flung them across the room.

He let out a cry and leaped off her. "You bitch!" he screamed. "You bitch!"

She kicked the sheet on top of him, jumped up, and ran out to the hall. The lock on the sundeck door was just a button. She pushed it and it opened and she screamed and screamed into the summer air.

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She could hear the rain still falling; nobody would be outside. If she could go out and reach the trellis, she could climb down and get help . . . *but she couldn't leave the baby.* There was a rake on the sundeck—if she had that for a weapon . . . She could hear movements behind her, the crash of a door, heels on the tile floor. She ran to the baby's door but he was there before her. He kicked her and she slumped down on the floor. By the time she pulled herself upright he was coming toward her, with the baby under one arm.

"Aren't you forgetting something, little girl?" he said. "You don't want to leave without this, do you?"

The baby was really crying now, his arms and legs flailing, his face scarlet.

"Don't hurt him," she said. "I'll do anything—just don't hurt him. He's scared. He's so scared—"

"Then come with me," he said in a voice as reasonable as if they were having a normal conversation. "I don't want *him.* What do I want with *him?* But you better get back here and get back here fast. And you had better stop screaming. What are you screaming for? I am your savior. You know that. I keep all the ladies safe. Their husbands can't do it, but I can. Hurry up now, while the bed is still warm. Remember the bed, our bed. . . ?"

Suddenly something pushed past her. She saw his back, saw the rake in his hands, heard the shriek of pain, and stood transfixed as the baby fell and was caught in midair by the stranger who then turned around and faced her. The stranger with the beard.

"Call the police," he said. "And then take him." He was cradling the baby. "He wants you. I suppose it's a him. He's wearing blue."

Afterwards, after the police had come and written their reports and she had declined an offer to go to the hospital, after she had called EverArmored and told them and they had said it could not happen—all their men were bonded and this was a new security installer from the West Coast who had excellent references (all fake, it turned out) . . . afterwards she couldn't stop shaking.

"Look," the young man said to her, "he was just crazy. You find crazies everyplace—let's make some coffee."

She sat at the kitchen table, the baby warm and purring in her arms. He poured coffee for both of them into Snoopy mugs, then sat across from her.

"Listen," he said, "I've got to tell you something. First off, do I look familiar to you? Have you noticed me around?"

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"Noticed you?" she said. "You were the one. You were the one I was so afraid of—"

"I was mad at you, all right," he said. "Boy, was I mad at you. *You cut down my apple tree.*"

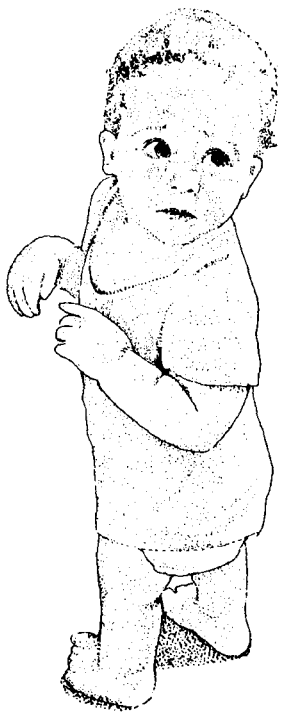
"What?"

"I used to live here. When I was a kid." He tapped the baby's head. "From the time I was this size, I guess. My folks live over the Ridge, about a mile away now. I'm down from school for the summer and I cut across this block whenever I go to see some guys I know. That's how I found out about the tree. It just blew my mind at first." His fingers smoothed the baby's skin. "When you're a kid you don't think things are ever going to change. . . ."

"You think you'll always be safe," she said.

"Safe?" he said. "Want me to tell you about being safe? Want me to tell you about my apple tree?"

And he did.



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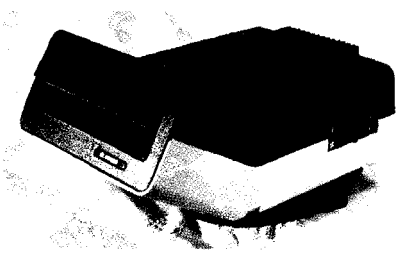

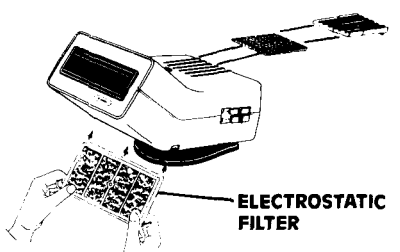

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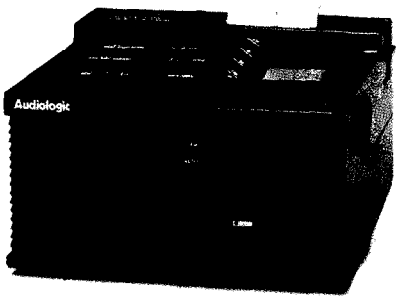

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